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An Anthology of Women's Experiences During World War II

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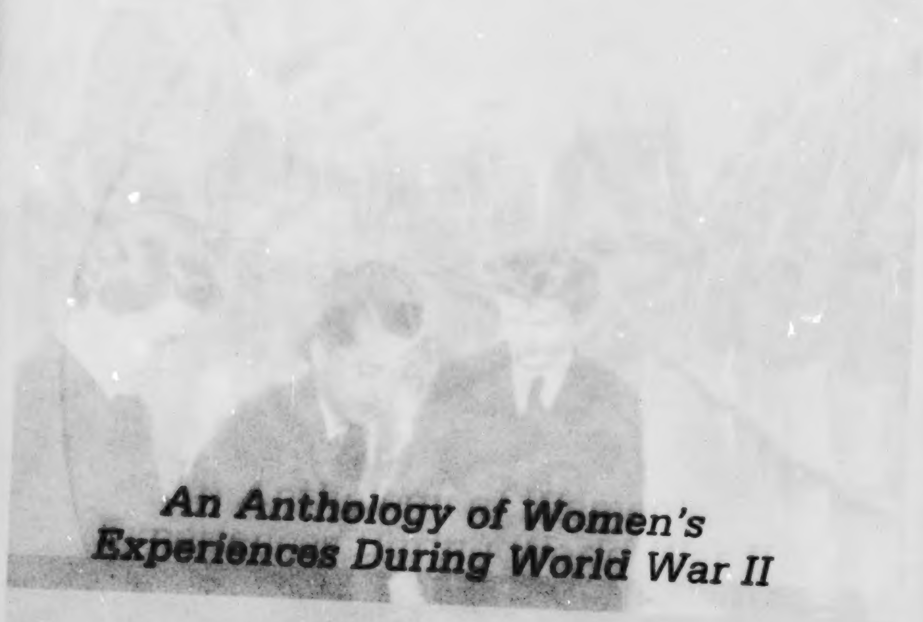

An Anthology of Women's Experiences During World War II

Produced by Lisa Banister

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As sponsor, I am very proud that this important anthology recognizes the courageous contributions of many women who have served before and empowers us to pass their great legacy onto future generations.

Alan Williams
Assistant Deputy Minister (Materiel)
The Department of National Defence
CANADA

Disclaimer

Beliefs and opinions expressed in this book are not necessarily those of the Department of National Defence. Before this book went to press, all reasonable efforts were made to obtain the approval of each contributor for the material placed under her name.

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Acknowledgements

Fascinated by the stories shared by my great aunt, Mary Attree, (who was a Second World War Dietician with Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps), and taking into account that Second World War veterans are not as young as they used to be, I recognized a need to create an anthology, a living document on the contributions and life experiences of these women. I work for Director Materiel Group Human Resources and at that time was an Intern from CareerEdge, the Federal Public Service Youth Internship Program.

Funding and approval came from Richard Burton, Chief of Staff (Materiel). The project became a departmental initiative to honor the more than 45,000 civilian and military women who served during the Second World War. The project also increases awareness of women's military contributions spanning decades and works towards meeting one of our key Employment Equity objectives in the recruitment and retention of female DND civilian and military personnel, by focusing on the important role of women in the CF and DND.

As work progressed on the anthology, Lieutenant Commander Karen Davis from Chief of Air Staff suggested the idea for a commemorative luncheon. The Director Material Group Human Resources agreed and sponsored the event. On October 26th, 1999 more than fifty-five years after the Second World War, seventy women gathered with currently serving military and civilian women at the Warrant Officers' & Sergeants' Mess in Ottawa for a commemorative luncheon in celebration of Women's History month.

All three canadian services were represented at the luncheon along with many others including: the Royal Canadian Air Force, Women's Division (RCAF WD), the Canadian Women's Army Corps (CWACs), the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service (WRCNS) and Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS), the Red Cross, Nursing Sisters, Polish Combatants, the British Auxiliary Fire Brigade, the Civilian War Industry Workers (Britain and Canada), the Women's Voluntary Service (British Columbia), the Women's Land Army, St. John Ambulance and the Red Cross.

Many of their stories are incredible in their realism and level of detail. Although many of their memories are very painful to relive, the veterans were pleased to share much of what they had experienced during the war years. For some, the time spent supporting the war effort were the best years of their lives; for others, these experiences were not as satisfying. However, all of the women who attended the luncheon seemed eager to talk about what they went through and how it affected their lives. Many brought their old photo albums and proudly regaled their listeners with accounts from the past. More importantly, the luncheon was a great opportunity for the women of today to hear, first hand, some of the challenges that the female veterans had faced and to be able to discuss the impact that their service has made on the role of women in the CF and in the workplace today.

Guest speakers at the luncheon included Brigadier-General(ret'd) Sheila Hellstrom, Captain (Navy) Judy Harper and Jack Granatstein, historian and formerly Director of the National War Museum. Brigadier-General(ret'd) Hellstrom praised these women for setting a precedent for the future of women in the Armed Forces. "Their stories really count and will serve as a starting point in chronicling the events of women who come after," she said.

Captain (Navy) Harper remarked that, "women continue to work as peacekeepers in many areas around the world. They carry on the proud legacy left to them by the courageous and dedicated women who served before."

These women had an integral part in that fight and we are pleased to honor them in the anthology.

I would like to thank my mentor and Director, Louise Teckles, Director Materiel Group Human Resources, for making this project possible with her support and enthusiasm. I would like to thank the other contributors for their assistance and contributions:

Michel Guibord, Capt Barb Masse, Liette Newman, Isabelle Casey, Charmion Chaplin-Thomas, MWO Jerry Loubert, Dan Tiffin, Tom Iannella, Chantal Lalonde, Margory Trenholme, Helen Flynn, Lt(N) Cathy Timms, Maj Mike MacPherson, Beverly Covington, Kay McIlravey, Kathleen Allan, Delma Capton, Mrs. Burchett, Dorcas Cuthbert, Marie-Rose Alarie, Geraldine Grenier, Elsa Lessard, Della Sprague, Freda Dougherty, Helen LeBrun, Alma McCaffrey, Edith McLean, Jessica Swail, Mary MacDonald, Mary Attree, Helen Mary Wolchuk, Muriel McAlister, Clement Lachance.

Lisa Banister

Foreword

This anthology consists of stories from fifty-five women recounting their experiences during the Second World War. It serves the very worthy purpose of honouring these women and their contributions to the eventual allied victory.

Some of the stories tell of danger and bravery, hardship and adjustment, challenges and learning. Others describe more modest endeavours with amusing and sometimes frankly embarrassing personal anecdotes. The majority of these women were very young when war broke out. They remember well the Depression which preceded the war and they welcomed the chance to make a contribution to wartime efforts. Most of the women served with one of the Canadian forces, others performed civilian duties and a few of the women did volunteer work. Their wartime experiences were formative and transformed their lives.

However, as suggested by distinguished historian Ruth Roach Pierson, a number of the stories confirm that at the end of the war women were expected to return to more traditional roles and were deprived of opportunities to contribute more fully to society. Jeanne Bouchard and Nellie Ross loved being part of the military and greatly regretted the end of their service; Lorna Cooney could not pursue a career as a photojournalist. Several contributors argue that the women's movement came partially from their experiences in wartime followed by post-war restrictions upon their endeavours. Yet, despite unfulfilled dreams, many women, like nurses, were able to stay in the military or pursued other activities, including raising families and civilian careers. These provided great satisfaction. The emphasis here is on positive accomplishments and, if any of these women had devastating experiences such as rape or assault, they have not recounted them here. Yet, some touch on the difficulties encountered by women who became pregnant at a time when society and the military provided little support to them. The other common element is the great sorrow experienced by those who lost relatives and friends during the conflict. Nearly all the women endured bereavement.

One of the women, Eva Konopacki, served in the Polish underground and was captured by the Germans. The end of the war for her was a true liberation and her story reminds us of hardships and oppression which were all too real for those living in Eastern Europe. The inclusion of this story perhaps serves best to highlight the grave dangers and difficulties of warfare and may allow readers to appreciate the sacrifices made by so many in this event which those of us born after the war can hardly imagine, let alone remember.

This is not an academic history and makes no pretense of presenting a factual or chronological account. Rather, it is based upon memories and impressions and, therefore, it contains both the virtues and the flaws that come from personal recollections of events long past. Readers are advised to take the time to savour these stories individually and to read only one or two at a time in order to fully appreciate each one. My only regret is that this anthology was not produced forty-five years ago.

Dr. Isabel Campbell
Chief Archivist,
Directorate of History and Heritage,
National Defence Headquarters

Introduction

Canada has a strong history of women's war service in both military and civilian capacities. During the Second World War, Canadian women worked in every sector of the economy and every field of national service, but they were most numerous in manufacturing and clerical occupations. They worked as cooks, waitresses and dieticians; shipyard welders and naval architects; clerks, typists; munitions workers and Red Cross nurses; lumberjacks, ranchers and economists; entertainers, journalists and code-breakers; aircraft assemblers, truck drivers and aeronautical engineers. They also did the traditional women's work, generally without pay: sheltering refugees, packing parcels for prisoners of war, knitting socks and mittens, making bandages and bedclothes for hospital patients, salvaging re-usable materials, and caring for their families despite shortages.

In 1945, when the war ended, about 750,000 women were employed in Canadian war industry and 760,000 more worked on Canadian farms. These women were carefully counted by the federal government because war industry and farming were reserved occupations (jobs that would keep men out of the armed forces), and each woman working in a reserved occupation meant another man available for military service. Less carefully enumerated, but even more essential to Canada's economic survival, were the 400,000 women who worked in regular civilian jobs. With so many men in the armed forces or working in war industries that produced nothing for domestic consumption, Canada ran on women's labour.

Even before war was declared, women joined social service groups such as the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), the Women's Institute (WI), the Imperial Order of Daughters of the Empire (IODE) and the Canadian Red Cross Society. Others formed paramilitary "auxiliary" groups to work, often without pay, in transport, clerical support, health care and community service specifically to promote and assist the war effort. Members of auxiliary groups generally assumed military-style ranks and titles, wore military-style uniforms, studied first aid and practised foot drill; some even learned to shoot.

Women were strongly attracted to service in the armed forces, not only to serve their King and country, but also because the war was the great experience of their generation. As soon as the armed forces showed any interest in recruiting women, they eagerly joined the Royal Canadian Air Force – Women's Division (RCAF WD) formed on July 2, 1941, as the Canadian Women's Auxiliary Air Force, the Canadian Women's Army Corps (CWAC) formed on August 13, 1941, and the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service (WRCNS) formed in July 1942.

Before 1939, the only female members of the Permanent Active Militia (Canada's regular army) were a few Nursing Sisters in the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps (RCAMC); the Royal Canadian Navy and the Royal Canadian Air Force had no female members at all. In 1945, the armed forces had 49 941 female members, including 21 624 in the CWAC, 17 018 in the RCAF WD, 6781 in the WRCNS, and 4518 in the RCAMC and the medical branches of the RCN and RCAF.

One measure of the change wrought by the increase of women's participation in public life during the Second World War was the increase in public acknowledgement of women's abilities. Today, the 19th-century image of women – primarily domestic, uninterested in technology or world affairs – is a distant memory for Canadians, and the Second World War was perhaps the period of greatest change in popular notions of what women should be.

The enrolment of women in post-secondary education, exceptional before 1939, became routine after 1945 – not least because veterans' benefits, including education, were awarded to women on the same basis as men. The widespread employment of women in skilled industrial and technical occupations, unheard of before 1939, was a national necessity by 1944. Although the vast majority of female war-workers lost their jobs when peace came, one of the lasting effects of their employment was the gradual integration of women in professions and trades that used to be almost exclusively male.

In effect, the Second World War obliterated an inescapable fact of pre-1939 Canadian society – the popular belief that women are and should remain second-class citizens.

Before 1941

Women's potential for war service was acknowledged and widely exploited in Canada as well as in Britain during the First World War. In 1918, the Militia Council in Ottawa formed a subcommittee to consider establishing a Canadian women's corps, but this initiative died with the Armistice. In Britain, far more devastated than Canada by the Great War, the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) was formed in 1916 and folded after the Armistice. In September 1938, at the height of the Munich crisis, a women's corps was established in the Territorial Army (Britain's army reserve) and received Royal Assent under the name Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS). It recruited women between the ages of 18 and 50, swore them in as full members of the Territorial Army, and organised them in companies under female officers.

The Canadian government hesitated to raise official women's services with full military status until the war was almost two years old. The Munich crisis showed many Canadians that another war was coming, and women began organising at that time. The first auxiliary group, formed on October 5, 1938, was the Ancillary Corps of Victoria, British Columbia, and similar groups quickly sprang up across the country. (Britain experienced a similar phenomenon, demonstrated best by the formation in 1938 of the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS), with Supply, Motor Transport, Clerical and First Aid divisions set up primarily to help victims of air raids.)

When war was declared on September 10, 1939, the Department of National Defence was again pondering the enrolment of women in the armed forces. Arguments in favour focused on the compliance of women in uniform – unlike civil servants, they could be posted anywhere to do a myriad of rear-echelon support jobs – administration, transport, communications, logistics – thus releasing men for service in combat units. Another favourable point was that the formation of women's services would silence the auxiliary groups. It was assumed that women would have to be taught to attain and maintain a military standard of performance and conduct, but military discipline was expected to instil in female recruits the required desire and ability.

These discussions, which went on for months, also covered the main disadvantage: the costs associated with providing training and uniforms, building or acquiring separate barracks, and providing benefits. Yet another concern was the issue of favouritism – with so many auxiliary groups now active in Canada, which should receive official recognition and full military status? By this point – the summer of 1940 – auxiliary groups had formed at the national level as well as in every province.

In the fall of 1940, Joan Kennedy and Madeline Nation of the British Columbia Women's Service Corps made a cross-Canada tour, interviewing the Canadian Army officers commanding Military Districts about their attitudes to women's enlistment, and investigating the status and capabilities of auxiliary groups. They finished their tour in November with a visit to Ottawa, where they were received by a very encouraging Princess Alice, a grand-daughter of Queen Victoria and the wife of the Earl of Athlone, Governor General of Canada. They presented their brief, which recommended "militarising" the auxiliary groups into a corps similar to the ATS, to Norman Rogers, the Minister of National Defence, and went home with high hopes. Three weeks later, Norman Rogers died in an air crash, and the new Minister, Colonel J.R. Ralston, was apparently too busy to consider the issue for several months.

In the spring of 1941, Prime Minister Churchill of Britain appealed directly to Canada for more soldiers, sailors and airmen. When Ottawa replied that all the available men were being sent, Churchill riposted, "What about your women – why are they not replacing men as cooks, waitresses, stenos, telephone operators and so on?" Finally, the Canadian government decided that each of the armed forces should recruit women directly. This solution permitted the services to set their own selection criteria and control the recruiting process – a necessary provision, as auxiliary groups generally did not consider whether applicants had husbands or children, or require them to meet standards of aptitude, physical fitness or morality. In the armed forces, family status and moral character would be of paramount importance.

Royal Canadian Air Force – Women's Division (RCAF WD)

By the time Parliament granted status the Canadian Women's Auxiliary Air Force (CWAAF) on July 2, 1941, it already had more than 17,000 members, the result of a steady letter-writing campaign. The decision to form the CWAAF arose partly from the permission granted in June 1941 to the British Mechanised Transport Corps to recruit Canadian women, and partly from the impending arrival from Britain of members of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force to work in the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan. In February 1942, the CWAAF was renamed the Royal Canadian Air Force (Women's Division) or RCAF WD.

The first Canadian officers appointed to select and train CWAAF recruits were Dr. Jean Davey and Kathleen Walker, former head of the Ottawa branch of the Red Cross Motor Transport Corps. Applicants had to be 21 to 41 years old (later 18 to 45 years old), more than five feet tall, "of good character" with no criminal record, and fit enough to pass a medical examination. Educational and aptitude qualifications were simple: applicants had to have completed Grade Eight, and be able to pass an entrance examination and a trades test. Married women could join, but not women with sons under 16 or daughters under 18. Women with permanent civil service jobs were not allowed to enrol.

The first CWAAF class of 150 recruits completed its five-week basic training course at Havergal College in Toronto, and the first CWAAF officers and NCOs were chosen from this group. Like the rest of the RCAF at this time, these women were English-speaking; the training system was not ready for unilingual francophone recruits. Eventually, all three services would set up schools to teach English to francophone recruits.

RCAF WD members wore an air force blue skirt, tunic and tie, with a lighter blue shirt and black lace-up shoes. The first (quickly abandoned) hat was a feminised version of the peaked forage cap worn by male officers, but with a soft top gathered at the sides. It was replaced with a visored cap similar to the CWAC cap but more streamlined. For manual labour, especially out of doors, WDs wore a variety of workdress, usually based on the clothing and equipment issued to men in the same trades.

RCAF WD members were employed in many technical trades as well as the administrative and logistics trades envisioned when the CWAAF was formed. WDs worked on BCATP stations and RCAF Home War Establishment units across Canada, and were quickly integrated into RCAF operations in Britain, especially in No. 6 Group, Bomber Command. By the end of the war, the RCAF WD included drivers, vehicle mechanics, armourers, instrument makers, airframe and aero-engine technicians, electricians and signallers as well as finance and administration clerks, nursing assistants, storeswomen, cooks and stewards.

Canadian Women's Army Corps (CWAC)

The CWAC was formed on August 13, 1941, to supply the Canadian army with cooks, washerwomen, waitresses, storeswomen, messengers, telephone operators, typists, stenographers and drivers. Later, the range of trades was broadened as CWAC members proved their worth and the army's manpower crisis increased. CWAC recruitment drives often featured a skit called *You're In The Army Now*, which featured the adjustment problems of stereotyped female recruits.

All CWAC members wore a dark khaki chauffeur-style cap, skirt, tunic and tie with a paler khaki military-style shirt, lisle stockings and brown leather lace-up shoes. In winter, a khaki greatcoat, khaki pullover sweater and brown leather gloves were also worn. Everyone got a haversack and a water bottle, and trade-specific items such as overalls, gauntlets, aprons and mitts were issued as required. CWAC dress uniforms had buttons and lozenge-shaped collar badges featuring Athene, Greek goddess of war; the device on the lozenge-shaped cap badge was a bunch of three long-stemmed maple leaves.

The initial organiser and first Commandant of the CWAC was Colonel Elizabeth Smellie, the decorated veteran Nursing Sister who was

Matron-in-Chief of the RCAMC and Superintendent of the Victorian Order of Nurses. In August and September of 1941, Colonel Smellie travelled across Canada, consulting staff officers at each Military District Headquarters, interviewing the leaders and members of auxiliary and community service groups, and identifying employment opportunities for CWAC members. She also selected the first cohort of CWAC officers and NCOs during this period. Under her direction, CWAC companies were formed in each Military District, commanded by female officers.

In November 1941, her work done, Colonel Smellie returned to her substantive position in the RCAMC, and Lieutenant-Colonel Joan Kennedy (originally of the British Columbia Volunteer Service Corps) became Officer Administering in her place, assisted by Lieutenant-Colonel Margaret Eaton. In April 1944, Lieutenant-Colonel Eaton attained the rank of Colonel and became Director-General of the CWAC, a position she retained until the corps was disbanded in late 1946. The CWAC reached its peak strength of 14 512 all ranks in April 1945.

As the official reluctance that marked their military début dissolved, CWAC members took on the jobs Winston Churchill thought properly theirs and more. First employed primarily in "pink collar" jobs (cooks, secretaries), they quickly became essential to the military logistics and administration system, both in Canada and overseas. As the manpower crisis worsened, CWAC members entered the skilled industrial trades (ordnance technicians, motor vehicle mechanics) and specialised military occupations (coders, signallers). By the end of the war, the Canadian army could not function without them.

Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service (WRCNS)

Authorized by Parliament on March 8, 1942, the WRCNS formed on July 31, 1942, with a male officer, Captain Eustace Brock of the Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve, as Director. At Captain Brock's insistence, three senior WRNS officers led by Superintendent Joan Carpenter came from Britain to launch the WRCNS and get it under way. The first cohort of wrens, 67 women selected from across Canada by Superintendent Carpenter and her assistants, started New Entry training on August 29, 1942, at Kingsmill House in Ottawa. Twenty-two of these women became the first WRCNS officers.

Lieutenant-Commander Isabel Macneill, OBE, the commanding officer of the WRCNS training establishment HMCS *Conestoga* (commissioned June 1, 1943, in Galt, Ontario), was the first woman in the British Commonwealth to hold an independent naval command. The buildings at *Conestoga* had traditional Royal Navy names such as Drake, Collingwood, Nelson and Beatty.

Throughout the war, wrens wore British-style uniforms – at first, a short-sleeved blue frock worn with a dark blue hat with a floppy brim and a cap tally that said "WRCNS." This rig was soon replaced with a Navy blue skirt-and-tunic uniform worn with a white shirt, black tie, black stockings and black leather shoes. Wrens below the rank of Petty Officer 1st Class wore a "pork pie" cap, a feminine version of the brimless ratings' cap, worn with the cap tally bearing the name of the wearer's ship. Officers wore the same skirt-and-tunic uniform as the wrens, with blue rings on the cuffs to designate rank. For them, the floppy-brim hat was restyled into a becoming tricorne, worn with the same foul-anchor-and-laurel-wreath badge worn by male naval officers. In summer, all ranks wore a light-blue skirt and tunic, and a white cotton cap cover. Wrens who worked outdoors, especially signallers and women whose jobs required boatwork, were issued the same boots, bell-bottomed trousers, heavy sweater and battle-dress jacket worn by male ratings in similar jobs.

By the end of the war, wrens were working in 48 trades, including dental assistant, censor, sick berth attendant, sailmaker and signaller. Signals was a popular occupation for which there was high demand; in 1942 the RCN took over an army camp at St-Hyacinthe, Quebec, to train hundreds of ratings, wrens and officers in a wide variety of communications-related trades – not only operators (wireless telegraphists, visual signallers, coders) but also the technicians who maintained their equipment. Wrens served in every Canadian province and in Newfoundland, the United States (especially the Canadian liaison delegations in Washington and New York), and at many Royal Navy stations, including London, Portsmouth, Plymouth and Greenock in the British Isles, and Gibraltar and Malta in the Mediterranean.

Recruiting

Initial recruiting for the women's services was quite successful; thousands of young women full of adventure and anxious to do their bit flocked to recruiting stations across Canada. In 1943, however, ugly rumours began to spread, the result of a mysterious "whispering campaign" to discourage women from leaving hearth and home. Targeting the worst fears of people facing too many changes too fast, these rumours alleged high rates of illegitimate pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease among servicewomen, and suggested that women joined the armed forces to get easy access to men – especially married men. The whispering campaign effectively dampened women's enthusiasm for joining up, and created a significant level of public hostility toward servicewomen.

The Department of National Defence investigated the whispering campaign, assessed the damage and issued a report: *An Enquiry Into the Attitude of the Canadian Public Towards the Women's Armed Forces.* The findings were distressing: even the views of servicemen and the family and friends of servicewomen were less positive than they had been only a year earlier. To counter the propaganda, resuscitate recruitment and boost morale, the National Film Board produced two short films about servicewomen: *Proudly She Marches and Wings on Her Shoulders.* On a more practical level, the reformers tackled the pay scale – women were generally paid 66 percent of what a man would make for the same work. When women's pay rates increased to 80 percent of men's, recruitment picked up considerably.

Despite black propaganda and low pay, enough women joined the armed forces that the army, navy and air force never lacked for logisticians, administrative and clerical staff, technicians or health care workers. Like the women who served in the First World War, many Second World War servicewomen found the adaptation to life in uniform challenging and even shocking, but few left voluntarily until the war was over – before V-E Day, most discharges were granted for marriage, pregnancy, illness or family crisis. And women's enduring pride in their wartime experiences shows that, for the majority, the experience was thoroughly worthwhile.

For more information

This introduction is a mere sketch of the issues surrounding the introduction of women to military and naval service during the Second World War. For further information, consult the Department of Veterans' Affairs website at **www.vac-acc.gc.ca**.

An Anthology of Experience

Isabel 'Peggy' Porter –
née Davis

The day Britain declared war was sunny and warm. I was with my extended family at my uncle's fishing camp north of Quebec. It was an enchanting place, and the rumours of the possibility of war had been forgotten while we swam, fished, went canoeing and enjoyed wonderful meals. Someone turned the radio on. Britain had declared war! Suddenly, everyone became sombre as we wondered what was in store for each of us.

Canada joined Britain and the other allies a week later, declaring war on September 10, 1939.

Little changed for us at home in Montreal for the first year, as Canada began to mobilise itself. In a remarkably short period, the government built a whole new industrial base. Men and women had to be trained to run the new machines. The armed forces began to expand and new recruits were trained as specialists in the various trades. The Red Cross appealed to older women to knit and pack parcels for prisoners of war; younger women were recruited for overseas duty as drivers, nurses aides and clerical workers.

Soon we were saying goodbye to friends going overseas. My older brother joined the RCAF. After training and instructing in Canada his turn came. He flew a newly manufactured aircraft across the Atlantic. It was hard to say goodbye. We were anxious to hear of his safe arrival.

I think it was then that I knew I would enlist in one of the women's forces. On my eighteenth birthday, I told my parents of my intentions. My father asked me to wait until I graduated, which proved to be good advice, as my degree opened opportunities for me in the services and later. By taking extra courses and a bit of summer school, I was able to graduate in three years. Soon after New Year 1943, I went to HMCS *Donnacona*, the Naval Reserve division in Montreal, to be interviewed for joining the WRCNS. An accomplice in all this was a long-time friend named Mary. We managed to be together for most of our service time. Shortly after graduation from university, we set off by train for Galt, Ontario, for our basic training.

It is only now, perhaps, that I realise what wonderful training we were given in such a very short time at HMCS *Conestoga*. The Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Commander Isabel Macneill (the first woman in the Commonwealth to hold an independent naval command) set a standard of excellence for all wrens. We were expected to fit into a disciplined organisation, learn whatever skills we were asked to learn, and grasp mysterious nautical customs and language.

We arrived late at night – I remember being escorted by flashlight to an upper bunk in a darkened dormitory. The building was originally part of a prison, and the first thing I saw that first morning when I awoke was the barred window; the second was that I was in a large room full of unknown women. Day One was pretty intense: inoculations, trying on uniforms, and going to various places to pick up kit, including white shoes and stockings. During the course of the day we heard about the quarterdeck, divisions, liberty boats, the galley and other nautical things.

When I awoke on Day Two, I knew that I was in my cabin in one of King George's ships, that I was in a hurry to get to the heads, and that I hoped to run along the gangway at full speed. We were encouraged to develop a salty edge to our conversation that would later give us confidence when we were posted to a ship. We learned foot drill, got fit on route marches, raised the flag in the morning and lowered it at sunset, and learned a bit about our own service.

Britain established the Women's Royal Naval Service during the First World War and reactivated it before 1939. In January 1942, the Royal Canadian Navy appointed a Director of Women's Services, a male naval officer. He turned to the WRNS for assistance but, unlike the WRNS (an auxiliary service), the WRCNS was to be part of the navy, with RCN ranks and subject to RCN rules and regulations. Three WRNS officers helped recruit, select and train the first classes of Canadian wrens. In March 1942, Chief Officer Dorothy Isherwood of the WRNS took command of the WRCNS until the designated Canadian officer, Commander Adelaide Sinclair, could return from England where she had been training with the WRNS.

Commander Sinclair was an economist seconded from the Prices and Trade Board. I met her only once, at my Officers' Training Course in Ottawa. She was very elegant and immaculately tailored in her blue summer uniform, and she lectured quietly and effectively. She became a life-long role model for me; after the war, she worked for the United Nations.

After a short training period, we left Galt for St-Hyacinthe, Quebec, about 30 miles from Montreal. So much for the slogan, Join the navy and see the world! I may have been the longest-serving wren at HMCS St-Hyacinthe. As a naval base, St-Hy was still in an early stage of growth. For the first month, we lived in a convent; after that, we were accommodated in very old quarters on the base until the spring, when new quarters were ready. During the winter, we worked two-hour shifts, two wrens to a shift, stoking the barrack stoves. In the intervals between rounds, we went to the gatehouse and enjoyed chatting with the guards on duty.

We had been recruited as Wireless Telegraphist Special Operators, and we were trained to work in a direction-finding signals-intelligence organisation with bases all over the world maintaining 24-hour surveillance of enemy high-frequency radio transmissions. Coded radio messages were picked up at random, and wrens with detectors took bearings on the transmitting location; information from other listening posts helped pinpoint the enemy locations (U-boats).

Our primary training was in learning to receive Morse Code at a minimum of 22 words a minute. A good part of our day was spent listening to Dave, a Canadian Pacific Railway telegraphist turned able seaman W/T,[1] who, with infinite patience, tapped away on his transmitter. We were also taught basic radio theory.

Our days were very full. Wake up at 0700 in time to get everything shipshape before breakfast. Next came "Divisions," when all personnel paraded before the Commanding Officer, Captain Musgrave, a 1914 graduate of Canada's first Naval College. (He later proposed the toast to the bride at my wedding in 1945).

I have strong memories of crisp autumn mornings, finding myself among many officers, ratings and wrens from all parts of Canada, united in wanting to end the war and to show loyalty to the naval ensign that we saw fluttering against a very blue sky. Captain Musgrave would make announcements, the Padre would lead us in prayer, and then the band played stirring marches as it led us past the Captain.

Most of the day was spent in our classrooms and, for those having difficulty keeping up, we returned to class some evenings to improve our Morse speed. Other evenings, we would "go ashore" by "liberty boat." This entailed going to the main gate at a particular time (usually about once an hour), lining up to be inspected by a Sub-Lieutenant, the Master-at-Arms, or a Chief Petty Officer. Uniform, hair and shoes had to be perfect; if not, you were dismissed and had to wait for the next liberty boat.

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[1] Wireless Telegraphist.

Saturday mornings were spent in heavy housework. Under the guidance of a Petty Officer, some cleaned the barracks, others the classrooms. This was in preparation for a random inspection by the Captain during his rounds.

Midway through the course, I developed pneumonia. A visit to Sick Bay was followed by an ambulance ride to the city hospital. I found myself in a long sunroom with several other wrens; sailors were hospitalised on a lower floor. The mostly French-speaking nurses and nuns nursed us very well, and the RCN doctors (there were four of them on base) looked after us. My time there included Christmas Day. I laugh when I remember the Captain, the Base Commander and the Paymaster bringing gifts for each hospitalised person. Mine was perfume in a beautifully wrapped box that was dropped accidentally; the smell of perfume nearly smothered us – it certainly wasn't Chanel No. 5! We shared a lot of laughter about that. After six weeks, I went home on a month's leave. Then I returned to St-Hy to find most of my friends gone.

My friend Mary had been kept on, and she was working with the Schoolmasters. (Schoolmasters wore green stripes; the doctors wore red stripes, and the paymasters white, to differentiate themselves from the Executive Officers.[2]) There were twenty-six of us. Mary and I gave a two-week course on radio theory to both sailors and wrens. There was a short textbook to follow, and we were given minimum training on a cathode-ray monitor (not unlike a TV) that we used to illustrate our points during our lectures. I was confident in my ability to show the difference between direct current and alternating current, but not at all confident about anything further. More training in electrical matters included building a radio from available kits. I was VERY PROUD of my finished radio, and one of my fellow Schoolmasters built a lovely wooden case for it.

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[2] Coloured "distinction cloth" was worn between the rings representing a specialist officer's rank, and indicated the branch to which the officer belonged. Executive Branch officers did not wear distinction cloth.

During this period, Mary had her twenty-first birthday (a prerequisite to becoming an officer) and, after graduating from her Officers' Training Course in Ottawa, she returned to the Schoolmasters' staff. I was now a Leading Wren,[3] but, upon reaching that magic number in July, I too went to Ottawa for OTC and then returned to St-Hy. New horizons were opening for us; new uniforms, pay increases and new responsibilities. We were joining ten other wren officers for a four-and-a-half-month signals course. We were now members of the officers' mess. A whole new social life was emerging; mess dinners, dances, chatting at the bar. I soon met Harry Porter, an RCN signals officer taking the "long course."

Our course was comprehensive; lectures were given by RCN signals officers. We learned about coding, and how to route messages to various parts of the world (up-to-date reference books provided the necessary information). We had to recognise various flags carried by all ships, each representing a letter of the alphabet and having a meaning of its own. I think a black one represented a destroyed U-boat. As well, there was early-morning time on the parade square, challenging in the winter months, when we practised reading Morse with lights, which was quite different from listening, and the required speed was considerably less. We also had to learn to send and read semaphore.

A few days in Halifax were a highlight. We observed various things, including an operational simulator. We saw messages being sent back and forth from shore to ships in the harbour. Sometimes lights were used and sometimes semaphore. Wrens played an important part here. Ships at sea wanting to use radio, which could be intercepted by the enemy, often used this method of signalling. Fleet manoeuvres were a daily occurrence with a Petty Officer showing commands.[4]

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[3] The first non-commissioned rank; equivalent to Leading Seaman or Corporal.

[4] The Petty Officer would have been demonstrating how to use flags and the Aldis lamp to transmit the various manoeuvre orders to other ships in a flotilla.

We soon got the hang of what we were supposed to do, and began to look forward to them as a welcome form of exercise.

Graduation was toward the end of March. In the interval, Harry had given me an engagement ring, and we were married in early April 1945, immediately after Harry's graduation from his signals course. I was posted to the dockyard in Esquimalt and Harry, who expected to go to the Pacific, found himself staying on at St-Hy as an instructor. After a few days in the Laurentians, we set off by train for Victoria, making use of his three weeks of leave.

I was to be in charge of the signals office (Signals Divisional Officer), relieving three Sub-Lieutenants who had been there working shifts. Two senior Petty Officers who had been there for some time were very helpful. There were W/T sailors and V/S[5] wrens, who were responsible for signalling in semaphore as well as using lights to send Morse, and about twenty civil servants, all women and all very efficient, who did administrative work way beyond their classification.

V-E Day came almost immediately. Celebration was the order of the day. A Montreal friend asked me aboard his ship. He was excited about going home to his girl (whom I knew), and I hoped to get back to St-Hy to be with Harry. There was much singing, drinking and a great sense of exhilaration! But the next day we remembered there was still Japan to fight. Soon after, there was a report that a Japanese balloon had been sighted, but nothing was forthcoming from the investigation. (I was reminded of this recently by an exhibit in the Canadian War Museum).

I remember HMCS *Prince Robert* leaving to join the British Pacific Fleet and, later, the return of HMCS *Uganda*. *Uganda* returned because most of the ship's company exercised a right given them by the government and elected not to serve in the Pacific Theatre. Many aboard had endured tough years at sea, but it was a controversial decision. She arrived back in Esquimalt a couple of weeks before the Japanese surrendered.

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[5] Visual Signaller

I continued to run the signals office until the beginning of October when, after being demobbed at HMCS *Donnacona*, I again returned to St-Hy. Twenty-five years later, I returned to that dockyard in Esquimalt to live in Admiral's House, only a few steps from the red brick administration building where I worked in 1945.

Many ex-wrens married RCN personnel, and I'm sure our own naval background was a great help to us. We had a better understanding of the frustration our husbands often had to cope with. The highlight of my years as a naval wife was the launch of HMCS *Athabaskan* on November 27, 1970, at Davie Shipbuilding in Lauzon, Quebec. The bottle of champagne broke as I said, "I name this ship *Athabaskan*. May God protect her and all who sail in her."

It was two years later, at the time of her *Athabaskan's* commissioning on September 30, 1972, that I found my own meaning for a ship's quarterdeck. All sailors salute the quarterdeck whenever they cross it. When I watched the ship's company of *Athabaskan* board her for the first time, I had a sense of a ship coming alive. Each sailor gave a part of himself to his ship and his shipmates when he saluted *Athabaskan's* quarterdeck.

I think that I, too, left a bit of my spirit with Canada's navy when I saluted the quarterdeck for the last time.

Sally Gouin –
née Coyne

I was born and brought up in Winnipeg. Before the war, I had been a debutante, got a university degree, and (as was customary in those days) did a great deal of voluntary work of one kind or another – some in support of the war effort. Through the YMCA, I was in charge of maintaining the waiting rooms at the railroad stations. Troops going through by train frequently had time to kill, but not enough to go into the city. So we set up an area with couches, chairs and desks with writing paper. There was coffee and food available. Rather than sitting in a cold station twiddling their thumbs, the soldiers could spend their time playing checkers or cards, or writing letters.

During wartime, everyone wanted to do their bit for the war effort; so as a goodwill gesture, some businesses would provide tours of their operations to men on leave. The YMCA once asked me to accompany an airman on a tour of the abattoir. I thought this was a little odd, but I agreed. We were given white coats to wear over our clothes, and then shown around. It was my one experience in an abattoir – interesting, but not one I'd care to repeat. At least I wasn't looking green by the end of it, like that poor unfortunate airman!

Because of its flat landscape, Manitoba was an ideal place for air training. There were at least three stations in the province that were part of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan. It wasn't just flying training; there were navigation and engineering schools too – though they were all disbanded at the end of the war.

When the RCAF formed its Women's Division (the first of the three services to do so), it posted signs all over the recruiting depots saying, "Join the Air Force – See the World!" I and two of my friends decided to apply. Winnipeg, I believe, had a quota of ten or fifteen women –

we were accepted into the first group of 150 airwomen nationwide. (As for "seeing the world," all I saw was Toronto and Ottawa!)

After enlisting, we were shipped off to Toronto for our training as LAWs (Leading Air Women). The women's Training Depot was in the former Havergal Ladies' College on Jarvis Street. The main building was used as the barracks, where we were first housed. There was also a very nice house on the property, which had been the principal's house, and it became the officers' residence and mess. The Commanding Officer and the staff lived there, and I did too later when I received my commission. At that time, Jarvis Street was notorious for its prostitutes; and we used to threaten that if the Air Force didn't pay us enough, we would join the other bunch!

The women I was closest to in our Winnipeg group were Betty Gardner and Frances Douglas. The first day we wore our uniforms, Betty, Fran and I walked through downtown Toronto saluting anything in uniform, because we didn't know who they were; and they saluted us, because they didn't have the vaguest idea who we were. We were the first women in uniform! We thought the uniforms were absolutely terrible. They were copied from the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) in England; and the hats made me feel as though I were wearing the ruffle from a lamb chop. (Our uniforms – and hats – were later redesigned.)

The WAAF was in full force in Britain at the start of the war, and sent four officers over to start us up. They were with us for about a year. Our first WAAF Group Officer was Betty Bather. And WAAF Squadron Officer Biddy Martin, who would eventually become an Air Commodore, was a great friend of mine – she and I shared a room in the officers' building. After the war, I went to visit her and her husband in England.

We found life pretty grim at the Depot at first. It was all just lectures, drilling on the parade ground, learning to march properly – and the food was terrible. There were garbage bins outside the mess hall door where you put whatever you didn't eat from your meals.

Some pigs must have eaten well! Any time we had any money, Fran, Betty and I would go to the Honeydew on College Street and treat ourselves to some real food. If we were really flush, there was a French restaurant on Charles Street where we could let ourselves go.

I remember when Pearl Harbour was bombed in December 1941. It was on a weekend, we had all just had our TABT shots (for tetanus etc.) and were having violent reactions. I remember sitting up in my upper berth, shivering and feeling absolutely foul. I had the radio on, and we heard the word then about Pearl Harbour.

After we had completed a three- or four-week course, we were divided up. About a third of us were commissioned as Section Officers; the others were Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs). Some were posted out to RCAF stations in Canada and overseas, while the rest of us remained at the Depot as instructors.

I think that when we were first commissioned, the RCAF didn't quite know what to do with us. In those days, women weren't as strong, either politically or in the business world, as they are nowadays. People were startled at first by the idea of women in the Service; but as more and more of us joined, the novelty quickly wore off.

As a Training Officer, I started off by instructing new recruits. One of my tasks was lecturing on a variety of subjects, which I never enjoyed. I always spoke much more quickly than I meant to, and my legs always shook – thank God I had the table in front of me. When I asked the inevitable, "Are there any questions?" I always hoped there wouldn't be any. I was never sure I could answer them!

I also had to take the raw recruits on route marches through downtown Toronto. The band would lead the parade, I was next with a squadron of officers-in-training behind me, and at the back were three squadrons of new recruits, tagging along to gain some experience. Unfortunately, the last squadron was so far to the rear that they couldn't hear the band, and so they were never in step. Our CO decided to do something about this, and moved the band back to the middle. So then it was me and my officers at the head of the parade; then the band; and finally the trainees – who would, it was hoped, hear the band and be more inclined to keep in step.

The only drawback to this arrangement was that there was always a policeman on horseback out in front, who would "clear the way" for us – and horses have a habit of letting loose! I would be marching along, very aware of where I was going, having to move slightly to the left or right to avoid the consequences of being the first person behind the horse. I was shaking with laughter. We didn't try that again!

The recruits came from all over the country. There were women from farms, from poorer districts, from high society. It was a mish-mash, which of course is how it should be. To some extent, I think the rank structure replaced the class structure. It was inevitable that different people had different opportunities; but education, responsibility and efficiency could make a difference for many, and help them rise to the officer level. However, that's not to say that the NCOs weren't every bit as good at their jobs as the officers. We all got down to it and did whatever we had to do.

My next posting was to another Manning Depot, at Rockcliffe in Ottawa – again, teaching raw recruits. Then I was posted to Air Force Headquarters, where I became the permanent secretary of the Dress and Clothing Committee, the Flying Clothing Committee, and the Emergency Equipment Committee. That's where I met my husband, who was then chairman of the Emergency Equipment Committee. Peter Gouin always called me "Miss," because he couldn't remember my name, and I always called him "Sir" because he was a Squadron Leader – which was a high rank as far as I was concerned.

Because I was the only woman on these committees, I took a lot of teasing. But the job was very interesting: at one time, I rewrote the entire dress regulations for the RCAF! And being on the Dress and Clothing Committee, I was able to have some influence on the new hat that was finally brought in for the WDs, as well as the new nursing uniform. Our WD uniforms were made of a material called "Blue

Barathea," though in summer they were khaki, and were mostly identical to the men's. There was the same belted tunic (since done away with), but we wore skirts instead of trousers. We had lisle stockings and black Oxfords. (Nowadays, if they want to, servicewomen can wear silk stockings and pumps or high heels.)

As Secretary of the Dress and Clothing Committee, I had lockers filled with clothing and equipment going back to the early days of the RCAF. I also had some samples of the RCAF dress uniform – which included a sword. This once caused a bit of a sensation: there was a big mess dinner in the RCAF Officers' Mess on Gloucester St., to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the founding of the RCAF. The Governor General was going to be there, and some bright-eyed person had the idea that it would be terribly smart to cut the huge birthday cake with the dress sword. So since I was in charge of organizing the event, I marched in uniform from the Jackson Building down to the Birks store at Sparks and Bank Streets, carrying this sword. I had them clean it, and then marched the sword back again.

The Chief of Air Staff frequently called on me to arrange parties, which nowadays we would call receptions. As a general rule, these events were all-male and held at the Chateau Laurier. (I ended up knowing the maître d'hôtel there extremely well, since I had to make most of the arrangements with him.) In those days, liquor was very tightly rationed; so I used to have to go around to all the Air Members and cadge booze from them, so the Air Chief Marshall would have enough for his party! Usually, I would attend the affair briefly to make sure that everything was all right. Sometimes I would be permitted one drink – then I'd be expected to leave, which I was usually only too glad to do.

(You had to have a permit to buy alcohol then, and you were only allowed a mickey, which was 13 ½ ounces, every two weeks. It was different in the messes, because they had privileges that individuals did not. At first, women weren't allowed in the mess bar; but we managed to kick up enough of a fuss that we became full members.)

I was quite involved with the RCAF Headquarters Officers' Mess, on Gloucester Street: I was its secretary, and was on several committees to restore and furnish it. The building had once been the Orange Hall; we demolished the stage at one end and installed a fireplace – where it still is now, with all the squadron crests around it. I was also on the Furnishings Committee, and flew to various RCAF bases located near furniture manufacturers to help the officer in charge of purchasing furniture. (I had to be in uniform for these flights, including a skirt; but I also had to wear a parachute pack. Quite a sight!) The finished mess was very successful, and a busy place for those of us at HQ.

My husband-to-be and I worked together quite a lot: when I was Mess Secretary, Peter was in charge of the entertainment. He lived with his sister and her husband out in the Britannia Beach area; and unless you were lucky enough to have a car , which he wasn't, the only transportation out there was by streetcar. So our Saturday night parties at the Mess were always a bit like *Cinderella* – before midnight, Peter would look at his watch and hurry out to catch the last streetcar. I'd wave goodbye to him from the steps of the mess, then walk home.

I took my discharge after V-J Day, in early September 1945. My life in the RCAF was interesting, but it wasn't always easy. The attitude of all of us was that we had to do our best. Many of my friends were killed in the war; but I gained a feeling of satisfaction from the knowledge that I hadn't been idle during it. (My recruiting papers are now at the National Aviation Museum in Ottawa.)

I'm unhappy with the recent press coverage of the military. I'm comfortable with women in a number of military roles, except for combat duty – I don't approve of women with children going on active duty. And I'm amazed at the number of women at Headquarters now, remembering how few we were in the beginning.

Jacqueline LaPlante –
née Ducharme

Before the war, I lived with my family in Ottawa – which was quite different then. It was much smaller: Riverside Drive to the south, Hurdman Bridge to the east, and Holland Street to the west – and that was the end of Ottawa! If you took the streetcar to Holland, you could put in another nickel to go as far as Britannia; and that was as far as you could go by streetcar. With transportation so limited, the world as we knew it was small. I remember being amazed when one neighbour on the street bought a car – that was a huge event to us.

The shopping malls hadn't evolved yet, and we didn't have many big stores. What is now The Bay on Rideau Street was then A.J. Frieman's; and we had the Kresge's and Metropolitan stores. The only big French department store downtown was Laroque's on the corner of Dalhousie. There were no big grocery stores then such as Loblaws or IGA (although the A&P would come along shortly after the war). We went to the local corner grocery, and our families literally kept these little stores going. Rideau and Sparks Street had speciality stores, and the market area was just for purchasing food. Farmers brought in meat carcasses and you bought pieces of meat and butter by the block.

I was still in school and living with my parents when the war started. That was the only time I remember the *Citizen* and the *Journal* putting out extras in the middle of the day, telling us that war had been declared. My little world at the time seemed to come to a standstill.

When he heard that war had been declared, my brother-in-law Ernie immediately said, "Where do I go to enlist?" By the next day, he was enlisted! He was immediately put into whatever uniform they had available so soon, and within two weeks he was sent over to England.

Because he rode a motorcycle they made him a dispatch rider on the front lines, driving around with the orders and carrying all kinds of messages. He was wounded, treated and then went right back to work. Then he went to Italy and got wounded again there; but he survived, came home to us and lived to a ripe old age. I admired that man very much.

As the war progressed and priorities changed, we saw its effects everywhere. The Ottawa Car Company that used to take up the whole block at Albert and Slater Streets, I believe, was switched over from making cars to making airplane and tank parts. (Everyone had to travel by streetcar anyway, since gasoline was strictly rationed.) The women at this factory wore overalls and snoods for their hair. I admired them for the hard work they did to contribute to the war effort. Those women were dedicated to their jobs, which they carried out proudly, as well as their other responsibilities: a lot of them had families, and their husbands were overseas.

In 1942 I was working in the Veterans' Affairs department in Ottawa. My sister Yvette, who was four years older than me, wanted to join the services – but she was very timid, and didn't want to join alone. I was her opposite, always an extrovert, so I said, "I'll join up with you!"

"You're not of age," she replied.

Well, I'm confessing my sins here – but I'm sure that no one would want to charge me now, after all this time – I went and got my baptism certificate out of the cathedral, and changed the last number of the year of my birth with ink eradicator! The recruiting centre accepted this, and my sister and I joined CWAC in October 1942, at 60 Queen Street in Ottawa.

(Another thing that influenced my decision to enlist was that I had met John LaPlante, the man who would become my husband, and he was in the services. I was only sixteen when we became engaged; so I thought, all right, I'll join up too!)

In a way, our mother was shocked by our enlistment; but in another way, she was very proud. She already had two sons overseas with the army, and now her two daughters had joined the service too. (Our mother thought that my sister would look after me – but as it turned out, I looked after her!) My whole family was proud of having four children out of ten in the services, as well as the husbands of my two married sisters.

Yvette and I were sent over to the barracks, which was Glebe Collegiate: the military had taken it over for wartime use. From there we went to Kitchener, Ontario for basic training. We lived in huts with pot-bellied stoves, and we each had our turn at picket duty – which meant staying up all night to fire the stove, shovelling in briquettes. My sister and I had a bargain, I would do her night-time picket duty for her when it was her turn, and she would make my bunk every morning for the whole month – making sure there wasn't a single pleat in it.

While in Kitchener, one of the girls was found to have head lice. (I forget her name, but her nickname for the rest of the war was Cootie!) That meant we all had to go through the lice routine: all the gals in the hut sat on the floor with another girl behind us, peering at each other's heads to see if we had any lice. We had to check and delouse each other. They gave us fine-toothed combs and special shampoos – did they ever stink! We had to wash all the sheets too, because if one girl was swarming with lice, the whole company could be confined to barracks. (I think the authorities were afraid of an epidemic; so they CB'd our hut for a whole week, until all the lice were gone. We laugh about it now, but it was certainly no fun then. I was so mad at those dammed head lice!

Then I was posted back to Ottawa again to work as an office clerk for the Adjutant General, Major-General Harry Letson. I was relieving a man's position so that he could go overseas, to the front. We women performed all sorts of duties to relieve the boys: our cypher clerks, for instance, were extremely essential to the war effort in Canada.

Some sent out the coded messages, and some decoded the incoming messages.

In Ottawa, I lived at home with my family at first, then moved into the Argyle Barracks with the other girls. I seemed to have a knack for getting into trouble. When we first joined up, they couldn't find a uniform to fit Yvette – she was quite a bit taller than me, with a tiny little waist. So they gave her coveralls to wear until they could order a properly fitting uniform from the main QM stores. One arrived, but it didn't fit very well. We were on parade, standing at attention, when I decided that she didn't look quite right and grabbed her skirt to fix it.

"What are you doing, Ducharme?!" the sergeant bellowed.

"Fixing my sister," I replied.

"You're charged!" she responded.

Another time, I was caught chewing gum on parade and put on the carpet for it. The Argyle Barracks had walkways edged with stones; so as punishment, I was given the job of whitewashing all of them. One at a time I picked up those stones, dipped them into the bucket of whitewash, and put them back on the path. Luckily, this type of thing was fun for me.

As well, I lost my purse and was brought up on charge again for not being attentive. Fortunately, someone found my purse and turned it into the Argyle Barracks – where the sergeant went through it. In it was a letter from John – this was just before I was to be married. In the letter, he had written the words "Mrs. LaPlante." Boy, did I get hell! "Your name is Ducharme, and you're not LaPlante until the day you get married and it's changed on your papers!" my sergeant briskly informed me.

Well, shortly after that John and I decided to get married, during his embarkation leave. I was only seventeen-and-a-half when I was married that June 1943. The Reverend, Captain Henri Bergeron, who performed the ceremony, was also from the Argyle Barracks; and he got permission to marry us in the cathedral. We both wore our uniforms, which meant that I couldn't have a bouquet – army regulations forbade carrying flowers while in uniform. But I had a lovely white missal with ribbons and a few white sweetheart roses attached to it. (I cherished that missal, and still have it.)

Then John was posted out to Debert, Nova Scotia, on submarine watch; and I went back to my job and kept working there for the rest of the war.

The war years had some good mixed in with the bad. There were a lot of things we didn't have, but also a lot that we did. There was so much feeling for everyone around us. There was the esprit de corps we all felt, and the sense of belonging and doing your bit. You became very attached to the people you were working with. If anything happened to any of them, you mourned their loss as you would a family member. Everyone would help at the drop of a pin. The war years were good for the emotions and the love that came out; but very sad for a lot of us who lost friends and family. A young cousin of mine who was in the air force was killed on his first sortie – the youngest man in his family. We all worried about our loved ones over there; and I think many of us lost relatives, or had them seriously injured. So it was a very sad time, yet a very proud time.

Whenever someone died, a telegram would arrive from National Defence saying, "Your son is missing in action"; and then shortly after, another would arrive saying that he had perished. Of course there was always the hope that they were wrong. Families would gather to mourn a loss – not just the family, but the whole street. People would come by and say their condolences.

Many things were rationed, and some things we could not get at all. We accepted this; everybody was in the same boat. Sometimes we would pool our ration tickets: everyone in a family would give their sugar rations to the women, who would put up preserves. Then each family member would get a little wee jar, and we were very pleased to get it.

We used many things for the war effort: the metal from wire hangers, for instance, was turned into planes or whatever the metal was needed for at that moment. (Children would take ten hangers and use them as admission when they went to the Français theatre on Dalhousie for a Saturday show.)

During the war years, there was a certain attitude of just living for today. I think that was pretty well par for the course: we all just lived in the present, because no one knew what was going to happen tomorrow. We didn't make long-range plans – nobody did. The men at the front, especially, had the mentality of living in the moment, going at everything whole-heartedly. They thought: "I've got three hours off right now, so if I get drunk, that's okay. In another four hours I'll be on the front, and I don't know if I'll see tomorrow morning or not." You didn't wait until tomorrow you lived today. Whether you were free with a few hours' pass or on the front with your full attention on the enemy – you gave as good as you got.

Some men didn't go to war. There were exemptions from conscription (which was enacted at one point): for example, if there were four boys on a farm, one would go to serve and the others would stay to work the farm. There were other special situations too. But we women didn't like it – we felt these men had used the system not to go to war. That was our mentality at the time. It was an unpopular choice, and such lads would be considered "nerds"! There would be no other males of their age group around either, since usually the boys would leave school and go straight into service. Only the younger boys would be left behind – and what nineteen-year-old girl would go out with a sixteen-year-old? I don't think women at the time were liberated enough to let that happen!

Oddly enough, some of our socializing was with German POWs. They were all over: we had a big prisoner-of-war camp in Pembroke that was there from the First World War; one in Ottawa, and another in Hull. There used to be a drill hall in Hull, and once a month a dance would be held there for the POWs. A call would go out to CWACs, wrens, air force girls and even civilians, asking for volunteers to go and dance. This was for the morale – of the prisoners! I never went, but some of my friends did.

The prisoners of war were treated very well in the camps. Some were given the liberty of working outside, and some were allowed to live on farms as long as they helped with the farming. This was because we needed the food, and many of our young farmers were out fighting. The POWs were very happy to be out working rather than in the camps. But we needed them as farmers too, because we needed the food. It was a two-way street. (A lot of those men came back to Canada after the war as immigrants. That's why there are so many German names in this area.)

When the war was finally over, I was down on Sparks Street. I remember jumping on the trolley, and there was such a celebration! Every noise that could be made in the city was being made: the church bells were all clanging, the whistles on factories were blowing, what jubilation!

After the war, in Lowertown, on almost every house that had a boy overseas there were decorations of flags, ribbons and bunting to welcome the boys' home. Our place was decorated too; but I remember that our real "welcome home" sign was a tree! My mother put up a tree for the last Christmas of the war, when we were expecting my brother Oscar to come back. But he didn't; more time passed, and still he hadn't come back. The needles all fell off that Christmas tree, but mum would not take it down. My father would say, "Anna, you've got to take that tree down." She would reply, "No, it's staying up until the boys come home." When they finally did come home, in April, the tree was bare – but it was still up!

When my brother-in-law Ernie finally came back, we were told that his train would arrive at Union Station. But we couldn't go there when they disembarked, because it would have been too much of a throng; so the soldiers were taken by trucks over to Lansdowne Park, which was then an operating military base. We all waited in numbered aisles for the truck with our loved ones to arrive. What a joy to see Ernie meet his five-year-old son for the first time! My sister had been pregnant when he left, and little Jacques only knew his dad's picture.

Some things we found out after the war were not pleasant, though. Any Canadians who were taken prisoner by the Germans were sent to POW camps, which were supposedly protected by the Geneva Convention from the First World War. But as information gradually became unclassified, the public learned that German troops had just taken people, even from their homes, if they didn't have papers. That happened everywhere: Germany, Austria, and Poland. Every place the Germans went they just took people, to the camps or worse. The Russian troops did it too.

When the war ended, people were liberated from the concentration camps – but it wasn't for many years that the public learned about all the atrocities. The media back then weren't what they are today, and information exchange was very slow. We had no televisions then, and we didn't have all these reporters, communication networks or computers. We did have radio, but a lot of it was censored – everything then had to be censored. They had to protect national security and keep morale up – no way were they going to tell wives or mothers everything that was going on.

The war had a big effect on women in Canada because they started going out to work. They found that they could bring in extra money, that their work had worth and that they could do things other than having babies and keeping house. That was the real point of change, when a woman could go out of her home to work – and it wasn't a disgrace to the man. Before that, the attitude was that a man should be able to support his family, and the woman was expected to stay home and look after him and the children. So that was the start of women's lib, when women started going out to work and making careers for themselves. In the work force today, we have women in all the occupations – we have a Supreme Court judge; we even had a prime minister, Kim Campbell. There are no holds barred! And all this would never have happened if it hadn't been for the war, and women going out to work.

I got out of the services when John came home. I was in for two years, but only rose to the rank of corporal: office workers didn't get too high. That was all right, though, because we needed people in that position too. I went to Kingston to be discharged. My husband was discharged from military service too – then promptly re-enlisted in the regular force. At one desk you signed a release paper, and at the next desk you signed another to join up again! (This was so that he would be entitled to his Veteran's Allowances and Re-Establishment Credit.) In all he served thirty years with the Royal Canadian Dragoons and then the Fort Garry Horse.

So even after the war, my military life continued. We lived in barracks, on bases, in permanent quarters, temporary quarters and emergency quarters. I was an army wife, and my four boys were "army brats." They went to every parade their dad was in, and all went into the Cadets. I'm so glad of the education they got. One thing I liked about the military was that everyone was on the same footing: there was no language, colour or religious discrimination whatsoever in their lives. And they had discipline: they were allowed to be children, but they were also disciplined. I could not have asked for a better background to bring my children up in – they all went into military service themselves, with either the regular force or the militia.

Our family moved every three years, every time my husband was posted. We became nomads. As long as I had my kids and my belongings, though, "home" was wherever we were. There was no such thing for us as getting attached to a place. But even with all the postings, we kept meeting the same people – sometimes with six or nine years between seeing each other. My boys made lifetime friends, and every time we were posted they would meet friends they had known before. We formed friendships that last to this day, with people we first met over fifty years ago!

I was very active in all the auxiliary activities on base. Most of us women became very good sharpshooters, because that was one of the things we were allowed to do. We had a Women's Rifle Team, with our own instructors. Once a week we could have the indoor firing range, where we would stand beside one another in the aisles, shooting at the targets.

In the military, you learn self-discipline. You know there are rules that everybody has to adhere to, and you know the consequences if you disobey them. I think that helped to form my character and my husband's – and also our children's, because this attitude carried over into our child raising. I'm very proud of all my children; they've all become upstanding citizens. There's no place like the military for building character.

The military has come a long way: it's much more human and humane, and has evolved to be highly respected in many areas. During the war it took anybody: anyone who had two arms, two legs and could see, was expected to be in the service. Today it encourages education and specialization. It trains people, and ensures that when they get out of the services they'll have marketable skills – not just being able to fire a gun!

I stand fully behind our military forces, and look up to them more every day. They are the cream of the crop. Even the cadets look so sharp, those young things running around and having rifle drills. I just love to see them. The military is in my blood.

My friends and I thoroughly enjoyed being in the armed forces. I saw myself as being the same as every other young woman of my age: we had a duty to do, and were very dedicated to whatever was needed at the time. That was a time of service. I think others saw us that way too. I never got any snide remarks: I was proud of being in the services, and everyone around me was proud that we were too.

Mary Saunders –
née Carry

Mary Saunders and Ft/L Robert Coote

When the war started, I was living at home in Toronto and about to start a training course to be a buyer at Eaton's. Then in June 1941, the air force asked for women to enlist. At first, they preferred the women to have university degrees; after that, people just enlisted as regular airwomen. I was from a military family, so we wanted to send somebody; but my father was over the age limit, my younger brother and sister were under age, and my other sister was married. (Married women weren't accepted into the services back then.) So I felt I should be the one to go – besides, I really wanted to!

I asked my father, who was army, what he thought of the air force. He said that if I wanted to go, I should, because the army might not ask for women. (At that point the army and the navy hadn't expressed any public interest in women's services, although they did later.)

I enlisted right away, which wasn't easy – when you applied to the air force then, it was like applying to finishing school. You had to submit several letters of recommendation along with your entry application, and they turned many people down. Anyway, I got in, and went for basic training at Jarvis, Ontario. My first posting was to Uplands, in

Ottawa, in January 1942. I wasn't there very long before I was sent on a training course for Non-Commissioned Officers. In order to be selected for this course, I had to be recommended by my own NCO, a permanent force member. I'll never forget him: he was so pompous! He never spoke to me if he could help it, because he could never bring himself to call me "Miss"– that was only for officers.

But when I asked him to recommend me, he couldn't say no. The day I left for the course, he called me into his office. He had all my application letters from various people sitting on his desk. He said to me, "Well, no wonder you got in – look at all these letters. I have to tell you, I hate to let you go: you've done more work than any two airmen." I almost fell over in shock!

I was one of 150 original airwomen who joined the Women's Division, and six of us went on the NCO course. When we got back to Jarvis, I was heartbroken: the other five had disappeared – to eat hot toast and jam in the Sergeant's Mess, I assumed, leaving me there just a corporal and eating cold toast by myself. I waited for four days, thinking, "Well, I guess I'm not going to make sergeant this time."

Then Squadron Officer Winn Taylor called me in and said, "You're going on an officer's course."

"But I want to be a sergeant," I told her.

"Silly girl, you're not sergeant material," she said. "You're going straight to the officer's course."

(My friends, who had in fact been made sergeants, also went on to this course some months later.)

Our officer's training was mainly to do with handling airwomen, because that was going to be our main job from now on. If you were in charge of a training squadron, you had a sergeant and two corporals to help you train the 200-300 new women who arrived every second week. You had to learn how to get along with them all.

After that, I went to the Manning School at Rockcliffe as a Junior Officer, serving under S/O Sally Coyne at No. 1 Training Squadron. Although we were supposed to be teaching the new recruits, in fact we didn't know what we were doing – nobody did! Another officer told us: "Don't worry if you don't understand the material, because they don't either. They assume that you know more than they do." Luckily, this did in fact work out.

We learned how to turn our squadrons out on parade. The appearance of such physical activities is always very important in the Forces. I appreciated it when the senior officer said that everything was always perfect when my squadron paraded at Rockcliffe. The RCAF sent us two instructors, who both walked like spears, to work with the women. One of them was named Ted Wright, and when we first met I thought he was a dreadful man. He spoke very forcefully; and when he came to Rockcliffe, I told him, "Sergeant-Major Wright, if you ever speak to any of my airwomen the way you spoke to me, I'll do something drastic." I'll never forget the look he gave me; but we eventually became friends. So much for first impressions!

Our biggest problem at Rockcliffe had to do with the French Canadian girls. If they wanted to sign up they had to do it secretly, without telling the village priest. If he found out they'd gone, he would go to their families and raise a ruckus. Then things kept happening to the families that required those girls to be sent home. We finally began to suspect that something was wrong; and next time we got one of those messages for a girl to go home, we sent the service police to the house. They found the mother hadn't really broken her leg or anything – the family (and the priest) just wanted the girl back.

When we realized this, we called the girl in and told her through an interpreter what was going on. We explained that we had already spent thousand of dollars on her – French girls were given six months of language school before writing their trades tests. We explained that this was her chance to get out of the village, travel and learn a trade. If she really wanted to go home, though, she should go right this minute – because if she decided to stay, she wouldn't be able to leave.

But that was one of the few bad situations we had to deal with – I never heard of any major problems when I was at Rockcliffe. I did have a good chuckle, though, at the girls from Newfoundland: I was told they never seen a telephone – or even a flush toilet! – before they came here. That seemed quite amazing to me.

My hero at Rockcliffe was Winn Taylor. She was the most wonderful person, with a marvellous manner and a terrific memory – I'm sure she knew every airwoman's name from coast to coast. She was a remarkable woman, absolutely adored by everybody. We knew we were lucky to have her. She handled every situation so well, and her attitude was perfect: she always knew when to play and when to calm you down. She was always fair, and had a wonderful direct manner. When she looked you straight in the eye, you would start to squirm if you were guilty. If she praised you, you felt as though all was right with the world.

My parents met Winn when they came up to visit and had dinner with us in the mess. My father said afterwards that he could tell why we admired her so much: she acted like a mentor. Somebody smart in the air force must have recognized the leadership qualities in her, although she was just a working girl from a middle-class background.

A while after that, I ended up going to England – all because of an actor named Robert Coote. Before the war started, he and another famous British actor, David Niven, had both lived in Hollywood. When war broke out, David went back to England to join up; and Robert, who didn't know what to do, came up to Canada and joined the RCAF. But he was absolutely hopeless as an airman – he washed out on everything! Then he had an idea: he went to the government and told them he had never seen so much talent as among the Canadian troops. He said, "These people are amazing, would you support me if I put on a show?"

Well, they thought it was a wonderful idea, so he started auditioning for members of a revue group to be called *The Blackouts*. He found all sorts of talented people. Our big stars Fran Harvey and Darcy Shea had joined the air force, and Bob found them sweeping floors and doing general duties for 75 cents a day. He recruited them; and a young man from Winnipeg named Henry Singer who wrote music; and Stan Solomon to play first viola, and Sammy Levine to play the bass. (After the war, those two both performed with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, and Sammy became president of Ontario's musicians union). Bob put together a wonderful show: the performers were young and enthusiastic, and everybody loved them. Then he started looking for someone to be his assistant.

When Robert Coote used to come for dinner at our mess, I didn't realize he was looking us over! But he asked me to be the junior officer in charge of the show, and go to Alaska with them.

At first, I was most insulted. "I didn't join the air force to work in a show!" I said.

So off they went without me, taking two other officers, a female and a male, instead. When they came back, it turned out that the trip had been a disastrous experience – those two officers didn't get along with the actors and musicians. So Robert asked me again: "I'm taking the show to England, will you come with me now?" This time, I jumped at the chance.

(Winn Taylor was very reluctant to let me go, but said she couldn't prevent me from having such a wonderful opportunity. That was the difference between her and a few other officers, who didn't support the careers of the women serving under them.)

Before I went overseas, my father took me shopping at the Pine Room in Eaton's. The air force had given us all 125 dollars to pay for our officers' clothes; but I spent about 500 dollars. My father said, "Even if it takes you two years to pay for it, get two skirts made with the same material as your tunic." That was wise advice, those extras came in very handy.

We went over to England on the *Mauritania*. To my dismay, I was made Officer in Command of the women for the whole ship. This was quite frightening, as we had a cranky CO who didn't even want women on his ship. At one point my friend George told the Adjutant that he would like to invite me in for a drink. Next thing I knew I was being marched over to the men's quarters by an armed guard! All my friends were sitting there on trunks having drinks, so I went in and had a drink with them. The door was left open and the guard stood waiting outside.

When we got to England, The Blackouts played in many wonderful places, including three months at the comedy theatre in London. We were very lucky to work with such trained musicians. It was a marvellous experience for everybody, even though we kept a busy schedule and never had more than a day off in between shows. We went from London right up to the tip of Scotland, where we had to wear wool coats in the middle of August!

After we'd been touring for six months, Robert was called back to London to take on the job of liaison between army, navy and air force entertainment groups. (The Americans were going to arrive almost immediately, and he expected that it would be part of his job to work with them too.) When he told headquarters that he was leaving, he said he was going to leave me, his junior officer, to run the show. They were horrified and said, "Oh, no, we can't have a woman in charge – the drivers won't tolerate it!" But Robert fought for me. He said, "She knows these people. They're not soldiers and airwomen, they're musicians – strange, unpredictable people. So please leave it as it is, and I'll go down and check up on them now and again."

So to their dismay, I was given Robert's job managing the show. It was always a challenge to get everything where it was supposed to be, on time; and there I was, a junior officer, with 42 people to watch over – three-quarters of them men, all temperamental musicians. I was in charge of literally everything; so if there were problems with receiving pay or mail, because of our being constantly on the move, I was the person everyone was nagging. At one point, I loaned out every cent I had!

We were quite a group: we had a huge bus to carry the people, and three trucks for carrying our instruments, gear, props and sets. We lived in flats fitted onto large trailers. You should have seen our entourage when we got going! (And it was true: four of the RAF drivers didn't like women officers at all.) Fortunately, I also had a personnel car and a chauffeur named Allen. He was always faithful and reliable, and I needed that – whenever I had to be picked up, he was there. He was funny too. He just couldn't manage to say the word "itinerary," so he used to ask me: "What's the new artillery, ma'am?"

We travelled all though England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland – we had to spend a lot of time in Ireland, because the authorities wouldn't let us come back across the Irish Sea because of the U-boats. But the American troops there were extremely generous to us, and their officers let us stay as long as we liked. My people were in heaven because of the American PX stores full of candy and cigarettes – you could buy everything imaginable there.

In 1945, it was decided that the show would go over to the Continent. We travelled to Belgium, first to a place called Blankenburg and then to Brussels. Unfortunately, our Squadron Leader in Brussels wasn't someone I could get along with. When we first arrived, he came charging up to me and said, "I have never seen so many dirty airmen in my life!"

I said, "Well, sir, have you ever travelled from Paris to Brussels in the back of a truck?"

That silenced him temporarily; but he wanted to be important, and thought he could do it by taking over our little group. He wanted people to think that he was in charge, so he kept bringing people backstage to meet the stars. Nobody could stand it. The airmen would ask me, "Ma'am, can you ask him not to come into the dressing rooms when we're all tired and sweaty?" I did ask him not to, but he kept doing it anyway. Then he wrote a nasty letter about me to Robert Coote and Hector Creighton, my two bosses in London.

Eventually, everything was set up for us to go to Paris. We stayed there for three months, two of them at the beautiful Madeleine theatre. Our next stop was supposed to be Germany, but the compounds were not set up there. (By this time, in July 1945, the Allies had occupied the area). This posed a problem, since no one was allowed into Germany without a gun – and they had an interesting time trying to figure out how musicians should carry guns! So we were sent to the south of France instead.

While we were there, that awful Squadron Leader flew down to tell me personally that I had been replaced as manager. I was most unpleased; but I chose to say, "Well, I believe the condemned person is allowed one last request."

"Of course, my dear," he replied in a patronizing tone.

I asked him to not tell any of my people I was leaving until we got back to Paris, as their morale was not the highest at that moment. His jaw dropped, but he had given me his word and kept quiet. When I did tell the group, the morning we reached Paris, there was a terrible hullabaloo.

Back in London, I found Robert and Hector nearly in tears. They said that they had managed to get rid of that dreadful man by sending him over to the continent – little knowing that I would run into him there. They wanted me to stay in London for the summer, so they sent Flight Lieutenant Roy Laurence, a pilot for Eastern Tours, to take the show on to Germany. So I missed that trip; but when the show came back I took over again – much to their delight.

We started out in Bournemouth with a show for the POWs who were just coming back; then headed north for Yorkshire. We had one adventure there: on a weekend off, I had my trusty chauffeur

Allen drive me over to see my friend Phoebe Magee, who was in charge of a Canadian RCAF station there. She and I went down to the airfield one evening and watched the planes take off, one after another. We stayed up all night, waiting with the ground crews for the planes to come back. (Two of them didn't that night.) Before the pilots could sleep, they were given coffee and Phoebe debriefed them about where they had dropped their bombs and so on. I went into the room with them and sat there listening as they answered her questions.

One of the advantages of our two tours through the Yorkshire area was that there were six Canadian groups stationed there, and they all had a trained dietician on staff who would do anything to improve the quality of the food. In England, in the wartime, this was just terrible – I wouldn't know how to describe it. There was hardly any choice, and it was unbelievable what we ate. We survived, though we all lost pounds, and I ended up in the hospital for three weeks with gastroenteritis. Apart from anything else, not getting a proper diet does awful things to your hair. When we visited the different stations, I would go to the Officers Mess and would see the pilots eating bacon, eggs and these huge bowls of vitamins. They had everything – and there we were, sitting on the other side of the table eating cold toast and watery coffee.

When you're really hungry, trying to get something to eat becomes the focal point of your whole day. It's hard to explain unless you've been through it. We always felt half-starved, because it often happened that the air force bases where we were stationed wouldn't have been warned that we were coming, and wouldn't have any extra rations. We shared their meals, and ate whatever they ate. We developed these desperate cravings for food. Once an airwoman ate an entire bottle of olives, and was desperately sick afterwards. And once, I drank almost a whole tin of tomato juice behind a locked door. That was a wonderful treat, but I felt so guilty – and I couldn't get rid of the empty tin afterwards, to conceal the evidence!

Fortunately, whenever we ran into the Americans, they were always wonderful. Once, later on, we met them in the forest somewhere on the Continent. They had one of their famous PX stores with them, as well as a milk-making truck and a dry-cleaning truck. I went to the Colonel and asked him, "Would you allow my people to come in here?" This was heaven to them, after being denied so much for so long.

(Meanwhile, back in Canada, food rationing had started. I had a letter from my mother complaining that she could no longer buy beef hearts to cook for our dogs. People were buying them now for themselves; and my mother was very upset because the dogs now had to eat canned food, which they never had before.)

Over the months, our show developed into a series of skits, with lots of comedy and great music – George Galanyis, a Vancouver musician, conducted our little orchestra. After we paved the way, the authorities found there was a great need for such shows to keep morale up. We couldn't cover all the ground we wanted to, so three smaller air force shows were started. Two of them, I remember, were called *All Clear* and *W Debs.* Our show was more like the big *Meet the Navy* show, which had the famous performer John Pratt in it. Both shows had loads of talent; but unfortunately we could never see each other – because of course we were all working whenever both shows were in London at the same time. They never saw us, and we never saw them.

Most of the civilians never saw us either – we weren't supposed to perform for them, just for the airmen. Our show was a free gift from Canada to cheer them up. If you weren't in uniform, you wouldn't be allowed into the theatre. Some people just didn't understand this: one station head said to me before a show, "Mary, I hope you don't mind, but I've asked some civilians over." There they were, sitting in the first four rows!

One of the biggest challenges of my service career was dealing with people, trying to keep everybody happy. That was difficult. Once when Bob and Hector were visiting, I burst into tears from the stress. Bob told me, "Mary, if you can't learn right now that you're not going to make everybody happy, then you might as well go home. It's impossible." I guess that's when I figured out that making 80 per cent happy was the best I could hope to do. There were always going to be things that somebody didn't like.

Some situations were particularly challenging. Once, an airwoman became pregnant and went into London for an abortion, but it didn't take. We were in Cambridge at the time, and it was a terrible situation: she was in agony, and something had to be done right away. I was running around frantically, and the air force station medical officer and the Cambridge medic were having a huge argument about who should take her in to the hospital for treatment. Of course abortions were illegal then, but her condition was dangerous. Fortunately, we got her into a nursing home; and afterwards they just tore up her medical record. There didn't seem to be any point in having that hanging over her head.

And another time, I had to try to get a cast member out of a Yorkshire prison. In England, when it's closing time at a pub, the owner says "Time, gentlemen" – and you're supposed to go! But our Freddie, the "bad boy" in the group, decided he wouldn't leave. They got fed up with him and decided to teach him a lesson, so Freddie was hauled off to the local jail. When I asked, "Where's Freddie?", I was told he was in prison. I phoned the prison, but they wouldn't allow me to speak to him – they didn't believe I was an officer, because I was a woman. He had to stay there for a month.

Fortunately, it turned out that Freddie was Jewish. None of us knew that, but the local Jewish people found out and would deliver apples and things to him. When he was finally due to be released, I took a corporal and my driver and drove up to get him. (We had to be up at 4 a.m. to be there on time.) When we got to the prison gates, first thing in the morning, we heard someone crying – I'll never forget that sound. It was Freddie, standing there holding his bags and wondering what to do now he had been put out – they hadn't even told him that I was coming for him. We all got in the car and started to cry. It was awful: he had lost forty pounds, and was a wreck for another month. That smartened him up, though.

When V-E Day finally came, we were in Paris. I had a surprise: some Canadian air force friends arrived from Germany looking for me. They had flown their Mosquitoes into the French countryside, left the planes parked there (with the rotors removed, so that no one could steal them), and then "borrowed" an old car and driven to Paris to see me!

"How did you manage to find me?" I asked.

"Don't be silly – how many Canadian girls are there in Paris?" they said.

So we spent three days driving around Paris together, hopping into bars, picking people up and dropping them off. Nobody went to bed. Eventually they had to go back to their planes, though. (And return the car!)

When V-J Day came, I was in London, and completely exhausted by then. I was offered a job in Paris, but I turned it down – I just said, "I want to go home." That wasn't a difficult decision at all.

When we came home, in November 1945, I was once again OC Women aboard the ship. This time we had British women, babies and all the different services represented aboard. It was a Danish ship, the *New Amsterdam*, and at 5 p.m. every afternoon I would be invited to a cocktail party. Having had no lunch (we only had two meals a day on board), I would just sort of totter down to the dinner table!

We arrived home to many positive comments about the work we had done. All the RAF stations we had visited had written letters to the Royal Canadian Air Force headquarters, saying what a wonderful treat it had been to see us.

Looking back, the whole wartime was an adventure. (We WDs, with our Canada badges, were objects of great curiosity in London, and would be stopped in the streets for conversation.) Being in the services made me grow up and assume responsibilities I had never dreamed of before. I realized I could do things, and do them well – that gave me a lot of confidence in dealing with people.

But I also learned that you have to be very careful about judging people. I remember back at Rockcliffe, S/O Ward – one of the four English WAAF officers originally sent to Canada to train us – called me in to her office one day.

"Carry, I owe you an apology," she said. "When I first knew you, I couldn't see past your blue mascara. But I want you to know that you're one of the best officers I have ever trained."

I got a lump in my throat, and thought I was going to cry. "Thank you," I managed to stammer. Eileen Ward was adored by all, and we all thought she had the highest standards we had ever known, and it was almost too much for her to say that to me. I've never forgotten her words.

My favourite aspect of service life was the sharing. Because you're away from your family and your close friends, you just make new friends with people you seem to have something in common with. Those relationships become very important, because these are the only people you can connect with in a bunch of strangers. Both men and women learn how to support their comrades, and they acquire a very special bond that just doesn't exist in civilian life.

When I first enlisted, my father said to me, "This is going to suit you perfectly, you'll do very well." I guess that was because he knew I usually accomplished what I set out to do. It turned out that my father was right: I enjoyed serving, and it did suit me perfectly.

Halina Sawicki-Tarkowska

When the Second World War started, I was 19 years old and a student in the School of Medicine at the University of Poznan. Poznan was the capital of the province of Wielkopolski in western Poland, bordering on Germany. I lived there with my mother and younger brother. My father, a surgeon and radiologist, lived in the smaller town of Grudziadz in the neighbouring province of Pomerania.

As the dark clouds of war threatened Poland in August 1939, some members of our family who lived in Warsaw insisted that we come and stay with them there, since the capital was farther away from the German border and we would be safer. They believed that the war would not last long, and that we would be able to return to our homes soon.

On the first day of September, before dawn, German soldiers dressed in Polish military uniforms attacked a German radio station in Gliwice, near the Polish border. We heard about this on our radios, and feared that the Germans would use the incident as a pretext to start a full-scale war with Poland. Indeed, the war started without declaration at 4:30 that morning. German airplanes bombed many Polish cities, and their armoured columns crossed our borders on all fronts. The fighting lasted only a month or so, until Poland surrendered: Warsaw capitulated on September 27. The destruction of the country was appalling. Many cities lay in ruins, and the casualties reached hundreds of thousands.

But our Polish government, in exile in London, England, declared that the struggle against the Germans must go on in spite of the defeat. The Polish Underground Resistance Movement was formed, and most able-bodied Poles, young and old, men and women, were eager to join the fight. In time, the Underground Army (later called the "Armia Krajowa," or AK) grew to a force half a million strong.

My family stayed in Warsaw during the fighting, and for the remainder of the war. Unfortunately, the Germans had annexed the western part of Poland, and our homes in Poznan and Grudziadz had been taken over by the Germans. It wasn't safe for us to return. My parents had lost all their possessions and had to start all over again in Warsaw, our new home.

In 1942 I too joined the resistance movement and became a sworn member of an active sabotage and diversion unit. My code name was "Ala." In my public life, I was then a nurse and midwife, and so was reasonably secure from deportation to a German slave labour camp. I even had a night pass allowing me to move around after curfew, which was very handy in my clandestine work. My parents were not aware of my activities. I was not married, but in order to keep my secret and have more freedom of movement, I rented a room for myself near my parents' place. For reasons of security, and also for their safety, I didn't tell them where I lived.

It is hard for people who have never suffered hostile occupation – such as under the Germans, the Japanese or the Soviets – to understand the sufferings of a conquered people. The Germans were determined to reduce the Poles to slavery. Children were not allowed to attend school beyond the sixth grade. High schools and universities were closed, teachers and professors arrested and often deported to concentration camps. We were not allowed to possess or even listen to radios, or read anything other than the German-published newspapers. Polish youths were not allowed to practice any sports. All associations and unions were forbidden, as were any gatherings of more than three people.

Movement from province to province was greatly restricted, and German police and security forces were always searching the trains looking for "suspicious" characters or goods. Many goods were confiscated for the use of the German forces, such as furs, bicycles and skis. The police curfew was usually from dusk to dawn, and German troops constantly patrolled the streets. Being caught without a pass meant arrest, concentration camp or even death. Possession of arms or prohibited materials was punishable by death.

Any violation of the rules established by the Germans, no matter how small, had grave consequences. The Germans practiced "group responsibility,"meaning that people were punished for the deeds of others. There were mass hostage-takings, followed by executions. These took place daily – first in secret locations or secluded areas such as forests; but later, in 1943 and 1944, openly in the streets of cities – especially Warsaw. Thousands upon thousands of people lost their lives daily. The total number of people in Poland murdered by the Germans during the war was around six million, including three million Polish Jews.

In my own family, several people were arrested and sent to concentration camps, although they had not personally engaged in any anti-German activities. One of my uncles rented a room to a young man, not knowing that he was a Jew – the penalty for sheltering a Jew was death. Two years after this lodger moved away, the Gestapo came and arrested my uncle. He was sent to a concentration camp, and did not survive.

In 1943 and 1944, as an active member of the Underground Army, I took part in a number of sabotage and armed diversion acts in

Warsaw and the surrounding areas. On one occasion, our detachment was given an assignment to attack and destroy a motorized column of German police patrolling one of Warsaw's main thoroughfares. Early in the morning of November 16, 1943, we reached our appointed positions: near Nowy Swiat and Ordynacka streets, where extensive ruins left over from the bombing of 1939 would provide cover and protection for the attackers. The group – 20 male soldiers and three female nurses, armed with several submachine guns, grenades and Molotov cocktails – waited for over an hour for its target to arrive.

Shortly after nine, two military trucks and two jeeps were spotted at the south end of the thoroughfare, and quickly reached the ambush. On a given signal, our boys opened fire at almost point-blank range with their automatic weapons, and threw the grenades and petrol bombs. The Germans responded immediately, and fierce fighting ensued. One truck was burning furiously; many Germans were lying on the street dead or wounded; and two of our boys were also hit. One managed to move on his own, but my friend Ksantypa and I had to pull the other from the ruins. His leg was bleeding profusely. Bullets were flying all over the place, some hitting the ground very close to us. It was really scary.

Once we were safe in a back street, we applied a dressing to the boy's damaged leg, and a horse cab took us to a secret clinic on Dobra Street, where we patched up the boy's leg. The whole action had taken only five minutes – our boys broke off efficiently, fearing the arrival of a German relief force. We later learned that the Germans had lost six policemen, with seven wounded. Unfortunately, in reprisal, a week later the Germans executed 60 Polish hostages.

In July 1944, the Polish government-in-exile – together with General Bor Komorowski, commander of the Underground Forces – decided to start an uprising against the Germans, who were retreating from the advancing Russians in eastern Poland. Although badly armed, we were driven to desperation by the constant bloody and inhuman treatment of the occupiers. We hoped and expected that our Western

Allies would help us by dropping arms and ammunition. But the Russians, although allied with the Western countries in their fight against the Germans, were apparently not willing to help the pro-western Polish Resistance forces to establish a free, independent, democratic Polish state. (Even before the Second World War began, Stalin had plans for Poland as a subjugated, communist-run country.)

So the Russians, who were then almost at the eastern gates of Warsaw, just across the Vistula River, deceptively encouraged us to fight. The Warsaw Uprising started on August 1, 1944, at five in the afternoon. But almost immediately, at Stalin's orders, the Russians forces retreated eastwards – allowing the Germans to completely encircle the city.

During the terrible fighting that followed, one personal bright spot was my growing affection for George Sawicki, a fellow member of the Underground Army. I met him on the first day of the Uprising, and we fought together with the same unit, sharing our joys, our grief and our despair. His presence helped me to endure the ordeal. We developed a deep friendship, then fell in love and decided to get married.

In spite of great shortages in arms, ammunition, medicine, food and water, the Polish insurgents managed to fight for sixty-three days – engaging almost 50,000 superbly armed German troops. Some meagre supplies by air from Great Britain were not enough. Without real and direct assistance from the Russians, Warsaw was systematically bombed, burned and almost completely destroyed. Some 200,000 civilians perished, together with 20,000 freedom fighters. On October 2, 1944, the Polish Command decided to surrender to the Germans.

In what we thought might be our last days of freedom, on October 3 George and I were married in the burned-out husk of a chapel in one of the areas of Warsaw not yet overrun by the Germans. Five couples were married together, and we shared one ring between us for the ceremony!

On October 5, we – the remaining members of the resistance movement – were marched off into captivity as prisoners of war. We left our beloved city walking proudly, in an orderly fashion, with our commanders at the head of our decimated units. Most of us were drained of our strength and our hopes for the future, not knowing whether the Germans would keep the terms of the surrender agreement.

That day, we walked 20 kilometres to a railway station – unbelievably hard on us, after two months of fighting and misery. We were dead tired and hungry. But on our way out of the city, the inhabitants of the Warsaw suburbs came running out of their houses and handed us bread, fruit and vegetables. The German guards did not stop them.

Next day at the station, we were herded into freight cars – 60 to each wagon. The men were to go to different POW camps in Germany, so my husband and I were separated. All the girls in my wagon were scared, not knowing where we were going or what the Germans would do to us.

Our trip lasted almost four days. For the first day we were locked in, without any food or water. There was no room to lie down or even sit; there was no light at all at night; and there was no washroom – not even a bucket to serve as a latrine. But during the day, we could see out through a small wired opening high up in the boxcar, and could watch the landscape and the names of the stations we passed. We soon realized that we were going to Germany. (At one point our transport, standing with others on a railway siding in Katowice, was bombed by Allied airplanes. Luckily, we were not hit.)

In Germany, I was first sent with other women from my unit to Stalag VIII B, a POW transit camp in Lamsdorf, Upper Silesia. Later, I was transferred to Stalag IV B in Muhlberg; and lastly, sent to a labour detachment of Stalag IV A in Radeburg, near Dresden. It was the first time in the history of modern war that women were imprisoned as soldiers in POW camps. The conditions in every camp were desperate: harsh hunger and infestation by lice and scabies, as well as other maladies. We in the medical units had no means to cure the sick. However, we did have "Cuprex" treatment for lice, since the Germans were deathly afraid of typhoid.

I stayed in the labour detachment from December 1944, to almost the end of February 1945. Conditions there were really harsh. Some 60 women POWs worked in a former brewery, manufacturing potato chips for the German army. We were drenched with cold or hot water from washing the potatoes, and always ached from lifting the heavy cauldrons loaded with raw chips. We were cold and undernourished all the time. Our rations consisted of one piece of black bread – only 200 grams of it for the whole day, with 5 grams of margarine or a spoonful of beet jam, and a cup of black imitation coffee. In the evenings, we would get a thin brown liquid with some vegetables floating in it – mostly burnt or spoiled turnips.

To be fair, the German guards were often as hungry as we were. Most of them were old men, as all the younger and more able-bodied Germans were on the battlefront. Some of the Germans were surprisingly nice people in that bad situation. I think they knew that the war would soon be over and they had better be nice to the prisoners, as it might help them later on.

We were without news from the outside world, or from our homes and families. Only very sporadic (and, of course, censored) correspondence was passed on to us by the German authorities. During the four-and-a-half months of my captivity, I received only two short postcards from my new husband. He was a prisoner of war himself, and had no idea where I was – he knew only the Stalag and my POW number. However, he had promised to find me, and he did!

In the late afternoon on Monday February 19, 1945, somebody called to me in the barracks where I lived, "Come quick, hurry! Your husband is here!" I ran outside into the courtyard, and there he was! He had escaped in mid-January from Stalag VIII B in Lamsdorf, where he had been imprisoned. Through perseverance and sheer luck, he had found me in Radeburg – after an almost 400 kilometre walk through war-torn Germany. We did not have time to say much – just embrace and kiss – before the old sergeant, our guard, came running. My husband was led away to a police station, where he was interrogated and accused of conspiring with a prisoner of war – meaning me.

At the police station, George claimed to be a Polish civilian worker, sympathetic to the Germans and fleeing from the advancing Russians. He said that, by accident, he had found out about my presence in Radeburg and just wanted to exchange a few words with me, a "stupid girl" who was involved in that "irresponsible Warsaw Uprising." Of course, he concealed his true identity as an escaped POW, and somehow the Germans believed his story.

He was allowed to stay overnight in the police station and the next day, he was permitted to see me in the presence of our camp commandant, a Gestapo agent and a policeman. We managed to speak in Polish, which they did not understand, for just long enough to make the arrangements for my escape. As a medic, I had a pass allowing me to get medicines for the camp from the local pharmacy when needed. The plan was to do that early next morning.

I didn't sleep all night. My fellow prisoners wished me luck, gave me some of their meagre food rations, and promised to keep my escape secret as long as possible. But just in case, to deceive the Germans, I told my friends that we were heading west. In reality, we were planning to go south.

Luckily, there were no problems at the camp gate. I spoke fluent German, and the guard knew that I was allowed out to get medical supplies. I moved slowly until I saw my husband waiting at the street corner; and then – on that unforgettable Wednesday February 21, 1945 – we were off, walking to freedom. It was a miracle!

That day we walked 46 kilometres. I was dead tired and had to rest frequently. But at that time there were thousands of people marching in different directions, in search of a safe place from the war, so we attracted no attention. We learned later that back in Radeberg, the Germans soon found out that I was missing and sent a search party west. Meanwhile, we were already quite a distance south, heading for the Czech border. Czechoslovakia had, of course, long been occupied by the Germans. However, after crossing the border we somehow felt safer. Our story of escaping from the horrors of the battle front line helped us to find shelter and food, and even earn some money for doing odd jobs. In a small town called Usti nad Labem, we registered in a German labour office as gardeners – thus obtaining very important documents that gave us some measure of protection and respectability.

After a few weeks of wandering in Czechoslovakia, we met some Polish and Czech partisans near a small town called Tanvald. We joined them without hesitation. As they were short of officers, my husband instantly became the leader of the Polish detachment. We stayed with that group until the war ended in May. Then George was honourably discharged, and sent to Prague for a long-overdue rest. There we spent our honeymoon – postponed for so many months by the war and our imprisonment.

After a month in Prague, we had to decide about our future. Returning to Poland was impossible, because the former freedom fighters and members of the pro-western Underground Army were being relentlessly persecuted by the puppet government of Polish Communists established by Moscow. Tens of thousands of our former comrades in arms were hunted down. Many were murdered, and most were imprisoned or deported to Siberia, from which they apparently never returned. So the only thing for us was to find our way west.

In June we managed to get to West Germany; then to Italy; and then to England, where we stayed for eleven years. My husband became an architect; and in 1957 we came to Canada with our two daughters. We never regretted that decision. Canada has been good to us, and I think we have been valuable members of Canadian society.

We have many friends in both Canadian and Polish-Canadian circles. Every year we commemorate our friends from the AK who paid the supreme price while fighting for our fatherland. Our reunions usually begin with a church service, followed by a social gathering during which we read memoirs, present slide shows from post-war Poland, sing songs, and treat ourselves to good coffee and traditional cakes. On our right forearms, we wear the red-and-white armbands that were our only identification as AK members during the Uprising.

My experience in the Polish Resistance army was unlike any standard military service in the West. We AK members were on the front line practically every minute of every day, for five long years. We were fighting for a noble cause: our freedom and our fatherland.

Men, women and even children fought arm in arm – age did not matter, and neither did gender. Polish women played a significant role in the fight against the Germans. Like the men, we transported arms, ammunition and explosives; carried messages, dispatches, illegal newspapers and secret transcripts; and operated clandestine radios. We were trained to shoot, blow up bridges and railway lines, trace the movements of Gestapo agents and German security officials, and rescue and care for wounded fellow fighters. We participated in armed action to destroy German military installations and equipment, and even participated in the liquidation of exceptionally cruel German officials, sentenced to death by the Underground authorities. By day or night, we were ready to follow orders. Often, for reasons of security or safety, we had to break ties with our families and friends.

And if we were captured, we were alone – alone to resist, and alone to die. For men and women alike, our most important principle was a supreme confidence in each other: many lives depended on it. In case of capture, under no circumstances were we allowed to disclose any information about our organizations or the identity of our fellow soldiers. Many perished under torture, taking those secrets with them.

For my wartime service and activities, I was awarded three Polish decorations: the Cross of Valour, the Bronze Cross of Merit with Swords, and the Cross of the Home Army. I was also promoted to the rank of sergeant. For his military exploits, including fighting the Germans from 1939 to 1944, and participating in the Warsaw Uprising, my husband was decorated twice with the Cross of Valour, and also with the Silver Cross of Merit with Swords, the Cross of the Home Army, the Partisans Cross, and others. During those years of fighting he was wounded four times – luckily without any major consequences. By the end of the war, he had risen to the rank of lieutenant.

Despite many colourful descriptions of war in films and books – the glorification of big battles, swift actions, and incredible acts of bravery and camaraderie – my own wartime experiences taught me that all wars are wrong and cruel. We must pass this message on to the younger generations. The world is now in its third millennium of the Christian era, and has not yet learned enough to prevent wars. In the daily news from certain countries, we hear of practically nothing but killing, pillage and destruction. This has to stop! I strongly believe that all democratic and freedom-loving nations should concentrate on restoring peace to our planet. And Canadian women – especially those in military service and in politics – could play a very significant role in this endeavour.

Eleanore Coburn –
née Boak

When the war began, I was single and lived with my parents in my hometown of Edinburgh, Scotland. My three brothers were in the services. I decided to enlist because I would have been conscripted anyway, and joined the Women's Auxiliary Air Force in October 1941. I travelled down to England by train, with many other girls my age, to a recruiting and training centre called Bridgnorth, in Shropshire. It was a traumatic experience for us all. Some had never even been away from home before, let alone with a bunch of strangers. But our consolation was that we were all in the same boat, which made us feel that we weren't on our own.

When we arrived at Bridgnorth, we were initiated into the trials and tribulations of "rookies." We were docketed, clothed, inspected, separated into groups and given bunk assignments and gas masks. Finally, attired in our spanking new uniforms, we WAAFs were given passes to go out of the camp for the evening. Most of us were elated, little knowing that the air force didn't then (and doesn't now) put its camps too close to large towns. Bridgnorth had to be reached by a bus, which did not run too frequently; and if you missed it at night that meant you had to walk back to camp. Of course we only learned this later, much to our sorrow!

However, we did manage to get to the town; and two other girls and I headed for the local photographer to get our pictures taken in uniform, to send home to our families. What we did after that escapes my memory, since it was eclipsed by the eventful hours later. We had to be back at camp by midnight, and managed to miss the bus. We got some kind of directions anyway, and the three of us started to walk back to the camp – in unfamiliar surroundings, in the pitch dark. At least we had torches with us; we always carried them since the war and its blackouts started.

We were walking three abreast along this narrow road, up a slight hill, and on the wrong side of the road – not facing the oncoming traffic, as we should have been. We heard the roar of a couple of motorcycles coming up behind us, but what we didn't hear was the car behind them. I was on the outside of the trio, nearest to the traffic, and the next thing I knew, something hit me with terrific force in the left buttock! My air force cap flew off my head into space, as did the gas mask slung over my shoulder. I was screaming at the top of my lungs. Naturally, the driver stopped to see what was going on, but really, we didn't know for a few seconds what had happened.

It turned out that what had hit me was the car's door handle, which had pierced my poor bottom and come off the car in the process. The two girls were in a panic. I suppose I must have been in a state of shock, though with no idea how badly I was injured. The driver bundled us into his car; and since neither he nor the two girls knew where our camp was (though had we but known, we were actually quite close to it), he drove us to a place called Wolverhampton, which seemed to me a long way away.

He took us to the first police station he saw, since he didn't know where the hospital was. What happened to the other WAAFs, I don't know to this day, but I remember a big burly policeman carrying me out to a car and then taking me to the hospital. I suppose they couldn't really see where I was injured, since there was only a slight tear in my skirt. We eventually found that the injury was deep rather than wide – since the car door handle was still stuck right in me! The wound had to be drained, then the top part stitched.

I think I was in hospital for about three weeks before I was sent back to camp – the wrong air force camp at first, as it turned out. But I finally got back to where I had started out from that fateful evening. I really was AWOL, as they say in the States, since for a while no one could find out where I came from. I had to attend sick parade for another two weeks to have the wound dressed and still have the scar as a memento. My fellow WAAFs called me "Numb Bum" for many weeks. And because I could only sit perched on my right side, I lost my posting rotation – so that instead of being sent to a fully operational station, for which we had been training, I had to hang around camp doing General Duties and waiting for a new posting.

Finally, I got a posting to RAF Cranwell in Lincolnshire, where I would be able to start the teleprinting course I had signed up for. As well as the British RAF personnel, people from many different countries were stationed there: Poles, Czechs, Canadians, Australians, and New Zealanders. They were taking all kinds of courses. Men were being trained as pilots and wireless air gunners, and WAAFs like us were being taught to use and repair the teleprinters – I think they were a forerunner of the Teletype machine. Since I wanted office work and had some experience in typing, I got into this course.

Our living quarters at Cranwell were memorable mostly for their chilliness. We WAAFs were billeted in the "married quarters" built in peacetime when married men could have their wives with them. The barracks were cold barns of places, with no central heating (nothing did in Britain in those days). If we'd been allowed coal for the fireplaces, it might not have been so bad, but to get any warmth at all we had to scrounge for firewood. Even then it was a job to get a fire started, because of the lack of paper. There were many times during my sojourn in the WAAF when I slept with most of my clothes on – as did many other girls.

There were four girls assigned to the room I was in. One I was friends with: her name was Elsie Eadie and she came from Port Glasgow, although she was born in Philadelphia, USA. She was a pretty girl, and much sought after by the airmen. Unfortunately she and I were on different training shifts for our course: I was on the early morning shift, and Elsie was on the afternoon one, so we only saw each other on the weekends. My shift had to get up at five a.m., get to the mess for breakfast and be in school by six-thirty. We marched to and from the training building to the sound of marching bands played over the tannoy. (We discovered later that some Canadians were operating it at the time, and usually played a piece called *The Great Little Army*. I think they were trying to tell us something!)

When we drilled, we marched three abreast, starting off on the left foot. The "marker" – usually the tallest WAAF – was always on the left, with two bodies to the right. Whenever the flight had to assemble, the NCO would yell for the marker to "fall in." She would march smartly up to the designated spot and come to attention. Then the NCO would holler to the rest of us to fall in to the right or left of the marker, and "dress" the ranks. If it was a right dress, everybody would extend their right arm to the shoulder of the next body until we were all the same distance from one another, and we too would come to attention: feet together, thumbs down our trouser sides, standing very straight. We had to stay in that position until the NCO gave the order, "Stand at ease." Then we would count to two, smartly move our right foot apart from the left one, and put our hands behind our backs. We didn't parade very often, but had to be on our toes when we did – especially if the CO took the salute and march-past.

The air force was rather sneaky about making us do things on our time off. Physical Training was one – many a time we tried to get out of it. It was the same with going to church: unless we were on duty on Sunday and detailed for Church Parade, very few of us attended church. Our time off was too precious, and most of us liked to spend as much of it as possible away from camp. About the only off-duty function we found acceptable was Pay Parade. A table would be set up with the pay envelopes piled up neatly, two officers and a NCO presiding. We fell in, in our flights, standing at ease; and when your name and number were called, you came smartly to attention, marched briskly forward to the table, saluted, took your envelope and marched away.

Our course lasted six weeks, and I was really intrigued by the teleprinter machine. The first thing we learned was that it operated by electrical impulses – before then, I didn't have a clue what that meant, and nor did the rest of class. We had to learn how to repair the machine, as well as send messages on it. This was a fascinating experience for me; and even today, I'm still entranced by all the advanced new word processors and computers. When we had learned all we could about this machine, our training period was over and we were ready to be posted to an Operational Station. That meant we would finally be in the war, doing our bit for our country by relieving the men from Signals duties to operational status.

My first posting was at Blackburn, Lancashire. The station had just been opened and the whole staff was new, which made for real camaraderie all round. The food in the mess hall was excellent too, which was more than could be said for some other stations! We had a woman sergeant who was well liked, and if there wasn't too much going on in the Signals section – no air raids, for example – she would split the shift up and let one batch sleep for a few hours (on the floor) while the rest worked, then switch the batches around. We always seemed to be short on sleep, so we appreciated this.

Now that we were in Signals, our training finally made itself useful. We transmitted messages all over via our teleprinter machines, either in plain language or in code. These were either letters or numbers, in blocks of five across and five down. At first they were rather awkward to type, but it didn't take too long to become routine. Some were better at it than others, though most of us preferred the plain language messages.

On this particular station there was also a teleprinter switchboard, and we all learned to operate that too. Except that we typed our call signal in instead of saying it, the switchboard jacks operated in much the same manner as an old-style telephone switchboard. When the light flashed, you plugged in the jack, typed out your station, waited for the linking station to answer and type out the station required, then took another jack and connected them.

We were all competent operators, or we wouldn't have been there; but one way and another, we learned a great deal at this station. There was opportunity for promotion here, and many WAAFs gained stripes and higher pay.

After these three stations in England, I had three postings in Scotland: the first two in my hometown of Edinburgh, and after that in Pitreavie Castle in Fife, Dumfrieshire. During this time, in 1942, I married a RCAF airman; and was discharged on March 23, 1945, with the rank of Leading Air Woman. I am also the proud owner of the Defence Medal and the 1939-1945 War Medal. When the war ended, my husband was repatriated and I headed for Toronto as a war bride – along with countless others. (We had our picture in the *Toronto Star.*) I settled down in this strange land to meet new people, learn to cope with decimal money, and adjust to my life as a civilian.

Wartime was a learning experience for life. Many of us women helped in the war effort, contributing to the services by releasing the men for more important duties. Although some people viewed us with scepticism, mostly we were recognized with gratitude. I still have my identity discs, and my fondest memory of my war experiences was the comradeship.

Joan 'Tommy' Voller – née Thompson

My British parents were both born in Sheffield, Yorkshire, and during the First World War my father had served in India and in Europe, including Egypt and Greece. My parents emigrated in 1921 to Saskatchewan, where I was born; later to Detroit; and finally to Ottawa in 1930.

When the war first started, I worked as a clerk at the Dominion Bureau of Statistics, helping with the 1941 Census. But after three years there, I felt the need to contribute more towards the war effort. My brother had joined the Royal Canadian Navy in 1937, and was now on North Atlantic convoy duty and in constant danger. What better incentive for joining the Wrens?

My parents were pleased when I enlisted; with my brother already in the RCN, they knew what to expect. Another girl who worked at the Bureau, my friend Esther Andrew, joined up with me. I had hoped two other friends, Peg and Marg, would also enlist; but they didn't want to leave their mothers. I didn't want to leave mine either, but I did want to do something different after three years of dry statistics.

I think that the women who chose to enlist were generally more adventurous. They had the courage to leave everybody behind and take a chance on the unknown; and they didn't mind obeying orders and wearing uniforms. Some girls missed wearing civvies, but I never did. The uniform was great because you were dressed for any occasion. As long as you had a clean shirt and the cap tally right, you never had to wonder what you were going to wear. (When the war ended, some of the Wrens gave their uniforms to the Girl Guide Leaders. Mine is now in a glass case at the Canadian War Museum.)

Within two weeks of enlisting, we were off by train to Windsor, Ontario, to release the men there for sea duty. We were very disappointed to find that the only categories needed at the time were laundresses, cooks, stewards and officer stewards (OS). Most of us opted for the latter. As soon as we were issued our uniforms, we posed for recruiting photographs. We stood on the deck of a mock-up "ship," first in civvies and then in uniform. Our summer uniforms were made of a light-blue cotton-blend fabric, but wrinkled so easily that we eventually stopped wearing them.

We were put to work in the galley of HMCS Hunter. The cooks we worked with were a great bunch of fellows; it was a happy "ship." Our quarters were in a comfortable tourist home across the street, and our unit officer, Lieutenant McQueen, was a very understanding lady.

In August 1944, I was drafted to HMCS Conestoga in Galt. We were immediately put into four more weeks of training – which, after our basic at Hunter, we approached like "old salts." There was more drill and parading, which I really enjoyed; though some didn't like it at all and never did learn to march. There was also "KR and AI" (King's Regulations and Admiralty's Instructions) to learn, and cleaning: we took turns emptying out the "gash" (garbage). When loaded, the cart took several people to tow it. But we Wrens all mucked in together and helped each other.

Conestoga was a very efficiently run ship, headed by Commander Isabel MacNeil – the only female commanding officer in the RCN at that time. (She was later awarded the OBE for her work with the womens' prison). Adelaide Sinclair was director of the wrens, and she was a lovely woman. Our wren officers were very smart and knowledgeable.

After a month, we were drafted to HMCS Cornwallis in Nova Scotia to learn how to be officer stewards. We arrived at the huge naval base – I believe it was the largest in the Commonwealth – very tired, as we sat up all the way on the train. As we trudged up the muddy roads past the laundry, we heard calls from the windows: "You'll be sorry!" What a lovely welcome!

After the OS course I was assigned to the wardroom, where I waited on tables in the dining room, for a while. Then I was put in charge of the cloakroom, which I enjoyed. I met several officers who had become well known for their various actions at sea. Harry DeWolfe would eventually become an Admiral, I believe. I also worked as a writer in Administration.

One of the events that enlivened our time at Cornwallis was the Navy Show, a variety act with singing and dancing. When I heard that the Recreation people needed performers for a show, I auditioned and was accepted as a singer. We rehearsed after our regular duties. Our director was Lou Silvers, who continued directing after the war. We took the show to naval bases all over Nova Scotia, performing for service people. I really enjoyed the experience – it was so much fun, and a break from our ordinary work.

We sang popular songs such as *Lucky To Be Me, One Meatball, Lonely Town, My Little Buckaroo,* and *When You And I Were Young, Maggie.* John Pratt always sang *You'll Get Used To It!,* and Fran Kissack was known for singing *Every Time We Say Goodbye.* I sang a duet of *Accentuate The Positive* with Marion Summerton, whose nickname was Smert.

For one show, a New York dancer who had performed in the original production of *Oklahoma* joined us in Cornwallis. Her name was

Louise Fornaca, and she was great – she really amazed everyone with her dancing. She said if we were ever in New York, we should look her up at the theatre and she would get us tickets to the show. (I took her up on her offer: in July 1945, I travelled to New York and saw Louise in *Oklahoma!*)

Unfortunately, because my sailor brother's wedding in Ottawa was at the same time as the auditions in Cornwallis, I missed the chance to try out for the Navy Show that toured overseas and made the movie *Meet the Navy*. Several people I performed with did: Brett Rowe and Tom Harvey were in the Navy Show movie too. Tom went on to an acting career – he studied acting with Lorne Greene in Toronto, and was on the *Wayne and Schuster Show.* Adam Gaw from Ottawa continued with his singing career. Quite a few of the people in our group continued to perform after the war.

It was also at Cornwallis that I met my future husband. One September weekend when I was off duty, a chum and I took the bus into Digby and decided to walk down to the jetty and look at a British submarine that was tied up there – the HMS L23. There was a sailor standing on the casing, so I called over and asked if we could tour the sub. He said, "Yes, come aboard and I'll show you around." So down we went – the smell of diesel oil was overwhelming. The sailor pointed out all the features of the sub; and when we went back up to the jetty, he said, "Maybe I'll see you again? Will either of you be coming back?"

We both said we would, but it turned out that next weekend I was the only one off duty. So I went alone and met him at the hostel where the men stayed when they were off duty. That was Keith Voller, and that was our first date. I think somehow you know when you've met the right person. We spent our time going to the pictures, out for long walks, and for scallops at the Cornwallis café. Sometimes he would come up to the base to see me. It was a whirlwind romance: before he left Digby in December we were engaged. (He borrowed money from me to buy my engagement ring – come to think of it, I never did get repaid!)

Then he was drafted to Philadelphia to pick up another submarine, the *Sportsman,* and sailed back to England. We didn't see each other until the war was over. I requested to be drafted overseas to join him: Keith's commanding officer wrote a letter to my CO to prove that we really were engaged. My CO, Freda Berry, arranged my passage by troop ship, and I took a bag of goodies with me for her mum in England.

I sailed from Halifax to Southampton on the *Lady Rodney* in March 1946. After I was discharged at HMCS Niobe in London I travelled on to the little village of Frensham, where we were married in April. I stayed there with his mother until Keith was demobilized from the Navy in August. Not being used to rationing, at my first dinner there I think I ate her whole month's supply of butter – I didn't realize that was all they had! They were only allotted two ounces of butter a week, plus two eggs and a quarter pound of sugar. It was all so different: young people there had never seen a banana, and it was a long time before they had any. (When I became pregnant, I was allowed extra milk for myself, and some orange juice and cod liver oil).

So I started married life in England, when they were just trying to recover from the war. Living there, and seeing what devastation the bombs had caused, gave me a different perspective on the horror of war. I saw shell holes and collapsed buildings in Southampton; and London, Sheffield and Portsmouth were just levelled in some spots. In Canada, we didn't really realize what they had gone through. We still don't – we've never gone through anything like it. What would we feel if the centre of Ottawa was bombed out? I think it was their British sense of humour that brought them through it. They were always able to laugh at something.

After Keith was demobbed, he trained with the British police force in Sheffield. I had my first child, little Susan, in May 1947 and was a busy mum. But I really missed my parents, whom he had never met, and wanted to show off my baby. So we decided to come back to Canada.

We came over on the *Aquitania,* along with many war brides. We were separated on the ship, with the men sleeping in one section and the women and babies in another. One thing surprised us after all the rationing and dark bread: we couldn't get over how white the bread was. It was like eating cake!

We landed in Halifax in October 1947, stayed with my brother and his wife for a few days and then went by train to Ottawa, where we met my parents and sister. There were more people in Ottawa than there had been, as there had been an influx of immigrants after the war – especially from the U.K. It was also much more developed. When I'd left there had still been many farms, dirt roads, outdoor toilets and quite a bit of bush. In our area (now Manor Park), we didn't have street lights or pavements when I left for England. But now there was work available, people were more prosperous, and they were starting to build new houses.

In wartime, it seems to me that people were much nicer to each other, more willing to help each other. The Navy really instilled discipline, and respect – for other people's differences, and for privacy. You had much less privacy than you were used to, and you had to learn to live with other people. And we wrens were always treated with respect.

The three services all had their own traditions and history, of which they were proud. While in the Navy, you didn't worry about what the other services were doing: the Navy was your whole life. However, there are many more occupations open to women in the Canadian Forces now. Looking back, if I could have chosen any category I would have chosen to be a Writer-Clerk, or maybe even gone into wireless. With training provided, I could have chosen anything really.

You never forget about the war. We had a different reason for joining up than women joining the military today: our whole country could have changed if we lost. We were motivated in wanting to prevent Hitler from having his way. Luckily he missed his chance to take Britain, and turned against Russia instead. But for us, it was a wonderful experience to do our jobs as best we could – and to know we were doing the right thing.

Ruth Stuart –
née Ralston

I was twenty-five and living at Hamilton Beach with my parents when I decided to enlist. I always felt that if there were a war I would be involved. My father had been too old to be in the first war, and service seemed something important to do.

At that stage in my life, if I hadn't joined the air force I would have become a professional photographer. I'd done some photography before the war: it seemed all my friends were getting married, so instead of buying gifts I would make wedding albums for them. One way or the other, I wanted to leave home – we all did. When we joined up, we thought we were being patriotic; but in retrospect, we know darn well that it was just our way of leaving home! In those days, both men and women stayed home with their parents until they were married, rather than moving out and getting an apartment. Many people don't realize this: but servicemen and women who married as soon as they left the air force and are now widows or widowers, have never lived on their own before in their lives!

Parents exerted more control then. One friend was lucky enough to find work in Toronto; but her parents insisted that she get a room at the YWCA, and return home every weekend. We were always right under our parents' thumbs. When I came home on leaves, they were still giving me orders!

I was one of the older girls to join the air force, as most girls were aged eighteen to twenty. But one woman in our course was forty. (The maximum age for enlisting was forty-five.) Her name was Eva Hill, from Nova Scotia. She had a tailoress friend at Rockcliffe, who during the First World War had patched up Camel aircraft in England. Eva told me that her friend had lied about her age to get into the RCAF, taking a few years off. That amused me, since many girls who were younger than the required age would lie about their age to get in – and here was someone over-age doing the same thing!

I signed up on my own. When I went to the Recruiting Centre there were about 15-20 aspiring airmen there, and only one aspiring airwoman: me. Of course, I had gussied myself up to enlist, and was wearing my blue suit with a red hat, red gloves and a purse. As we all sat there writing the IQ test, the old "Boy Meets Girl" was very distracting! I don't know how they all did, but I hope they got in all right. Other than that, I had no trouble enlisting. That particular recruiting centre was very well organized, and made everyone go down to City Hall and get a birth certificate. Not all centres did that.

I think that those of my friends who decided to join up were more independent to start with than those who didn't. Later, after my discharge, I found that I really didn't have much in common with the women who didn't enlist. We military women spoke a different language.

I went for basic training at Rockcliffe, in Ottawa, and then started my service career with a three-month photography course there. We covered the same material as the men, but ours was the only all-women photo course. After that, all the courses were mixed. One of the girls on our course was named Patsy Holden (later Collins), who had been one of the many British children evacuated from England and sent to Canada for safety. Patsy had joined the air force by pretending to be 18; and whenever she was asked to produce her birth certificate, she would just reply that she had written home for it. Eventually her reply changed to: "It must have gone down to Davy Jones's locker." Finally she turned eighteen and was legal anyway, so it didn't matter!

The air force was a big adjustment. At home I'd always had a room to myself. But in basic there were two girls to a room; then there were ten; and later, when I was posted to Fingal, there were seventy-two of us in the room. There wasn't much privacy! If you wanted to read, you would just sit on your bunk and try to tune the others out. Luckily, I didn't have any trouble doing that.

There were all kinds of chores to be done around the barracks, many of which were "Joe" jobs – ones that didn't need much skill or concentration, such as sweeping the floors. When it was time for cleaning, a list was put up to determine whose turn it was – that was known as being "Joed" to do something. "Joe" jobs weren't limited to any person or trade; we all took our turns. But none of us were thrilled when we were "Joed" for something when we'd already made other plans, such as swimming or horseback riding.

One of the "Joe" jobs was to be Sheet Joe, who would pick up the dirty sheets from all the bunks and distribute clean ones. We used to have fun 'frenching', or short-sheeting, the beds! Chances were that if you worked late into the evening, you'd come home to a "apple pie" bed – your legs would only go down halfway, and you'd have to remake it.

Our appearance was another adjustment, since our hair always had to be kept two inches above the collar. Some women cut their hair; others kept it long and rolled it up into a kerchief to keep it up. When we were inspected, the officers would walk behind us checking to see that our hair was above our collars. They also checked the shine on our buttons and our skirt lengths. Our uniform skirts were supposed to be only so many inches above the floor. But I have very long legs; and when I was issued my uniform, the WD equipment officer looked at me and said, "There's no way we can put a skirt that long on you, you'll trip over it." So I was allowed to wear my skirt a little bit shorter.

For our "forty-eights" (two-day passes), we liked to get into our civvies. (At first we weren't allowed to do this, but later they changed the rule.) Mostly, we didn't mind wearing our uniforms – in fact, I really liked it. When we got up in the morning we didn't need to worry about what we would wear that day; we just had to make sure our buttons and shoes were shining. And we photographers also got to wear airmen's battle dress and khakis: if you're crawling around an aircraft, it isn't a good idea to do it in a skirt! We were issued winter parkas too, beautiful warm things, and winter caps. The photographers and the Motor Transport (MT) drivers were the only two groups that got these, which made some of the others jealous.

The selection for that first class of airwomen photographers was a hit-and-miss affair. When the trade opened up, many people from stations decided they wanted to remuster and join us. I expect our IQs had something to do with being accepted into the trade – the course involved an awful lot of studying. (Regarding IQ, though, sometimes you would meet someone and wonder how he or she ever got into the Air Force!)

At first, there was some opposition to women enlisting – both from the public and within the RCAF. If a WD did something dumb, the newspapers would always play it up. Fortunately, that didn't happen very often. Initially, some COs didn't want women on their stations; but then when the WDs arrived and the COs realized how efficient they were, they wanted more! My friend Marion Tuck (later Mainprize) joined before me, and was one of the first women not only at Jarvis but also out in Newfoundland. She told me that she was treated royally there, and that word had spread that the WDs coming over were really smart. (She also got to wear her Canada badges, as Newfoundland was a crown colony back then.)

In the photography course, I had a friend named Eva Nadkrynechy – we called her Naddy. She came from way out in northern Alberta. In our classes, she was always first and I was always second. She had originally joined up as General Duties, and worked in the photo unit washing pictures. Then they remustered her into the first class of women photographers. Naddy was afterwards assigned to work with a chap who was experimenting with colour photography. She stayed at Rockcliffe and moved up from corporal to sergeant to flight sergeant; but I still think I had more fun than she did.

Rockcliffe was a huge station, and I met people who worked on different parts of the station in various trades. Another girl I became friends with was Helen Brennan (later Howard), who worked for the WD Officer. Helen and I would often go out for dinner on our paydays. I was still a corporal when she earned her third hook and became the first WD sergeant at lower Rockcliffe. (There were WD sergeants already at upper Rockcliffe, the Manning Depot).The brass didn't know what to do about moving her to the Sergeant's Mess, so they started off by putting a sheet on the table in the OR (Other Ranks) Mess. All the corporals could sit and eat with her. This went on for about a week; then the men from the Sergeant's Mess caught on and said, "Hey, there's a WD Sergeant, we want her in our mess." From then on, that's where she ate.

In our barracks there was quite an assortment of people from all over the station, and the country. One of the things I discovered was how many different accents we have across Canada! I think many Southern Ontario girls were often taken for Americans, because we listened to the U.S. news. The girls from Victoria seemed so English; and the ones from Nova Scotia had their own accents too. But we were (and are) all Canadians.

There was a school at Rockcliffe where the French-Canadian girls had English forced down their throats – they had to become bilingual. There was a girl on our photo course named Pauline Gauthier, and to my dying day I shall regret that I never translated anything for her. (Neither did the instructors, who were Ontario high school graduates, so they would have known some French.) She had only just learned English, but she still managed to pass the photography course – which is just incredible, as there were so many technical things.

Another friend was Mary McKenna (later Wotherspoon), an MT driver. Once after a funeral in Ottawa, she had to drive one of the photographers, Norma Thorne (now married to Calwood Lee) to take pictures of the grave. When they arrived at the cemetery, they found there weren't any flowers on it; so they decided to "borrow" some flowers from the other graves for the photo shoot. But when they went to put them back, Mary had to ask, "Which grave had which flowers?" They couldn't remember! So they just tried to distribute them evenly, and hoped that nobody would notice.

When our photography course was over, twelve girls from the class were posted all over, but I and four others stayed at Rockcliffe. One thing that really upset me was that six photo girls had been sent overseas, to London, England. I couldn't understand why I hadn't been chosen. I had everything going for me: I was old enough, I was a corporal, and I had experience. (We weren't usually allowed to go overseas as photographers, because airmen photographers sometimes went on Ops.) So it was almost a relief to find out that a mistake had been made: when the girls got over, London AFHQ asked what they were doing there! It turned out that London had requested "PTs," not photographers – PTs were physical trainers. Somehow it had got mixed up. But since the girls were already there, they were allowed to stay.

After the course I was assigned to the printing room at first, and we gradually moved through all the different sections: enlarging, slides, copying, etc. However, I hardly ever got to actually take pictures. I kept asking to go out West, by which I meant Alberta or B.C. But I suppose the authorities thought that anything beyond Toronto was "west," because a year after my course finished I was posted to Fingal Bombing and Gunnery Station. It was on the shore of Lake Erie, twelve miles outside St. Thomas, Ontario.

Everybody at "4B&G" (Four Bombing and Gunnery) was highly involved in training the aircrew. There were six WD photographers in the photo section, and we all got to do everything. We used the F24 aerial camera for training the bomber pilots – I can still go through its electrical cycle of operation! We installed these cameras in the aircraft for the trainee bombers to take photos of their simulated bombing exercises.

These boys were mostly Canadians, with some Aussies, English and New Zealanders thrown in, and many had never been up in an aircraft before. The simulated bombings were usually their first flights, so of course they were nervous – they'd want to do well, because otherwise they'd be washed out as aircrew. They'd have go up and pretend to bomb the Ambassador Bridge between Windsor and Detroit, for instance, or a railroad. (The air force always selected training targets similar to the real ones over in Germany.)

So they'd take the pictures and bring the F24 film back to us; and we would process these beautiful pictures of farmers' fields. If the photos showed the "bombs" had missed, often the guys would come and say: "You mixed up my film with someone else's, I was dead on!" Well, after two or three flights, they usually *were* dead on. (But by that time, so many of them had come in to the photo section to argue with us that was it was put out of bounds to them. But that didn't stop them from coming up to us in the mess and saying, "See, I told you I was dead on!")

For the gunners, we used special 16mm camera guns mounted on the outside of the aircraft. We had to climb up and adjust them – usually in the winter dark – for how bright it was going to be when they got upstairs. Once we processed the movie film, those cameras would tell us how the gunners were doing when they fired at the other aircraft. Again, after a few practice flights, they too were dead on.

We photographers would also run around with a "speed graphic" camera, taking pictures for various uses; such as the charts sent to HQ every month, as well as for groundwork and modifications. (The speed graphic used 4″x5″ cut film, loaded in holders, so you could develop the negatives individually instead of having to do a whole roll. They had flashguns too, for shooting indoors, which were synchronized with the shutter. Newspaper photographers used speed graphics because of their convenient features: for instance, one adjustment allowed the lens to be raised, so that tall buildings would appear perpendicular in photos rather than seeming to fall backward.)

We photographed funerals and plane crashes too. (We didn't have many casualties at Fingal, because our pilots were all staff – whereas the Service Flying Training Schools, where the boys were learning to fly, had a lot more. The first Mosquito at Rockcliffe crashed and sat burning on the runway. It was horrible – there was nothing anyone could do.) But there were some crashes at Fingal, and they all had to be photographed from the air. We were given 75 cents per day flying pay – a nice bonus on top of my corporal's pay, which was two dollars and ten cents a day.

When we photographed funerals, afterwards we would always find out the addresses of the dead airmen and send their parents copies of the pictures. If the family lived in Canberra, Australia (or wherever), they would eventually get official copies – sent from Fingal to Toronto to Ottawa and then overseas. But they would arrive six to eight months later; whereas the parents got the pictures from us hot off the press. (The air force policy was that Canadian casualties were sent home to whatever province for burial, but Commonwealth casualties were buried in Canada.)

And once in a while, we would fly some special photography jobs – such as when senior officers with gold braid up to their elbows wanted pictures of their summer houses!

But the icing on the cake was our station paper at Fingal – we used to take pictures for that too. The most dramatic shot I ever took was of a fire in the paint shop. One day I heard the fire sirens, grabbed the speed graphic and ran to the paint shop, which was engulfed in flames. To make matters worse, the Air Officer Commanding was about to arrive for an inspection. His plane was circling overhead; but our CO certainly wouldn't let him land while there was a fire.

I'll never forget our CO, Group Captain Kerr, standing there bellowing: "Water, water!" Of course, that's the last thing you want to put on a paint fire! But that was the only goof he ever made – he was a great CO. He knew all the staff members on that station by name. He would drop by the various sections to have coffee, and at every one he'd say, "You make the best coffee on this station." He was permanent force, and eventually was posted overseas – something that was dear to everyone's heart. When he was trying to say goodbye at his last parade, he was so emotional that he couldn't manage to get his speech out; so it was published in the station paper. I don't know how much flying he was able to do overseas, but he survived.

I really enjoyed working at Fingal. I had found the photography work at Rockcliffe too much like a factory. Much of the film we processed there had been sent back from overseas or the east coast. The interesting part was that a lot of our work there was secret, such as making slides of Japanese aircraft for training the pilots to identify them. Still, even secret projects could be dull. The Alaska Highway, for instance – when they were building it, they had a lot of photos that were taken in the early twenties. We had to make thirty-five prints of *each* of those negatives. We thought they must have given a print to every GI working on the highway! But you didn't need to be a trained photographer to turn out thirty-five prints of a negative, and then go on to the next one. I wanted to use the skills I'd been taught, which was why I preferred the variety of work we had at the Bombing and Gunnery School.

One good friend I had in the photography section there was the sergeant in charge, whose parents had decided to name her Florence Nightingale! Not surprisingly, she preferred to be called Gale. (Later, she married and became Florence Alexander.) We had been friends back at Rockcliffe; then she was posted to Jarvis; and then ended up at Fingal, and we were reacquainted. Gale was in charge, as sergeant, so she had all the problems; and I was second as her corporal. She and I had a friendly rivalry over who knew more about photography.

We didn't have any women officers in our trade – any female officers at Fingal were in Administration. One day a new Section Officer arrived; and as we always took a picture of our new officers for the station paper, Gale went off with the speed graphic to snap the new Ma'am. Well, as it happened, our canteen had just received some red nail polish; and the rule was that you could wear polish when off-duty, to dances and such – but not to work the next day. And Gale was dripping with red polish when she went in to welcome the lady officer to Fingal and take her picture!

"Sergeant, look at your nails!" the Ma'am protested.

"Oh yes, Ma'am," Gale replied. "The developer stains our nails brown – "(this was true)"– so I have given my photographers permission to wear nail polish at all times."

"Oh, all right, Sergeant," said Ma'am.

(That officer was Thelma Holmes (later Clarke), and she was really moved about during the war – on more stations than most of us could even name. That was the luck of the draw. She lives out in Dundas today, and I can still get a rise out of her by saying, "How about that red nail polish?!")

Speaking of the luck of the draw: one WD photographer, Muriel North, was killed when a Harvard went into a spin and crashed out in North Battleford, Saskatchewan. I didn't know her personally, but we often thought about her – that could have been any one of us. Of more than 18,000 RCAF dead, some thirty were airwomen. (An interesting book on the subject is *They Shall Grow Not Old*, published by the Commonwealth Air Training Plan in Brandon, Manitoba.)

Society in general reacted differently to death back then: there was so much of it. Many of our parents had come through the First World War and had seen it all before. There wasn't a lot of fuss made. If someone received word that their fiancé had been killed overseas, for instance, her section would give her the day off and her coworkers would sympathize – and that was it. I don't recall anyone travelling home to a parent's funeral, although I'm sure compassionate leave would have been given for that. After the war, though, it seems to me that death gradually became very commercialized, with fancy funerals.

In early 1945, right before V-E Day, "our Great White Father in Ottawa" started to close down stations across Canada and let people

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out. Fingal closed and they shipped us back to Rockcliffe, as we were now considered surplus. I guess at that point they weren't sure what to do with us; and there were so many of us that we were tripping over each other! As corporal, I had four Leading Air Women, not just Joes, under me; and it was our job to run the four drum dryers for drying prints. We had to keep these dryers full at all times. Well, I could keep them full by myself, and so could any one of the girls – but they had five of us assigned! I would give them a break, but we all became really bored. Finally, HQ came to its senses and realized that it needed to get rid of some of these people.

I got out in August 1945 and was very gung-ho to marry my boyfriend, a civilian I had known since high school. He had been a war worker at the Dofasco foundry in Hamilton, and I married him in October instead of going on to university.

When we all got back home after the war, some of the kids we'd grown up with were missing. We were lucky: in our Hamilton Beach group of friends, only one guy had bought it. Bob MacKay had been a pilot, and was shot down over Berlin. We'd all known one another for years and were platonic friends, so none of us were upset that several of the boys had brought English war brides back with them! Many of those couples stayed together, and are now celebrating their 50th and 60th wedding anniversaries.

However, the war also broke up a lot of marriages, because of the time spent apart and people running around on each other. There were many second marriages. One of my friends was a social worker, and she worked with the many women who were left behind during the war. But the guys too would sometimes return from overseas to find that their fiancées had married someone else, or were just not interested – and hadn't bothered writing a "Dear John" letter.

Another friend, Dorothy Whittem, had met an Aussie when he was posted to Claresholm, Alberta, and they got engaged. After she was discharged she travelled to Australia to marry him – by ship, which took ages. As well as Dorothy and some other girls who were going over to be married, there were lots of war brides with babies on the ship. The children would often get seasick, so the girls would look after them. All sorts of people held the babies all the way across the Pacific. Well, as the ship was finally coming into port at Sydney, Dorothy suddenly thought: "I shouldn't be holding this baby – he'll think it's mine!" So she turned to the nearest person, said, "Here!" and handed the child over. It got handed around until finally it was safe for someone to hold it!

Every five years or so, we have reunions of photographers. At one such event in 1966 one old chap who attended had been a photographer in the First World War, and there were several pre-Second World War photographers. A bunch of us Second World War photographers were there, and some from after the war and all the way up to the present as well. There was a young Duty Joe who was assigned to take pictures of us, and at first he didn't look too happy – he was about eighteen, and probably had a date for that night. But by the middle of the evening, he was enthusiastically running about telling people to "Hold that!" while he took pictures of us. He said, "I didn't know that photo was one big family." We still look at it that way – we have a special esprit de corps. I know that I personally became more independent because of my service experience – I became friendlier, and could stand on my own two feet better.

It's still interesting to me to see what's going on in the trade today. In 1999, when I was travelling out West, I got a special pass to visit the base at Cold Lake – the biggest in Canada now. The photo section there really laid out the red carpet for this old gal! They couldn't have been nicer: they gave me a tour of the hangar and showed me everything, including the "smart bombs" they have now. Compared to the bombs we had – wow! Much of the photography now is digital. One of their corporals was over in Italy at the time, and was sending digital photos back to them to view on a computer.

I told their section about our next reunion, scheduled for September 2000 in Ottawa, and they're all coming.

Dorothy Lutz

In 1939 I was living with my mother and stepfather in Half Island Cove, Nova Scotia. I had been brought up in the country by my grandparents. We had a big farm, and there were lots of vegetables and berries, dairy and beef. But when I was ten, my grandfather died and grandmother was taken to hospital; so I was shuffled off to live with my mother and stepfather down at the shore. It was a very poor place and my stepfather wasn't employed. We lived on relief of 5 dollars a month. That would buy us a bag of flour, some molasses, and yeast to make bread. That was it, that was our diet. If we wanted to go anywhere, we had to walk.

There were a few people who could afford more – who could buy school books to allow their children to get a better education. (In those days, we had to buy our own books.) But there was no teacher in our area who could teach Grade Nine, so those children would go out of town and board with relatives to attend school. It was a two-class society, those with money and those without.

I left school when I turned fourteen, and got a housekeeping job. I worked at this and various other jobs until 1943, when I ended up in

Halifax, staying with my cousins and trying to find work. I didn't know the city at all, so I learned my way around by going for walks. On one of these, I saw a recruiting station.

The recruiting posters caught my eye because the women looked so smart in their uniforms. I thought, since there didn't seem to be any jobs available in Nova Scotia, that I should join the army. The uniforms were appealing, and I could travel, have good meals and get an education. But I was only sixteen then, and would have to lie about my age to enlist. My grandparents had taught me that lying is wrong. So although I was only seconds from signing up, I chose not to go through with it.

Shortly afterwards, I read an ad in the newspaper saying there was work available with an electric welding company. There were thirty-five girls there, and we were given paper and pencils and told to draw a straight line from left to right, from top to bottom, and from corner to corner. We signed the papers, gave our phone numbers and left. I didn't expect much of it.

But a few days later, I received a letter informing me that I was accepted for a training course in electric welding. (Only five people were chosen out of the thirty-five.) We trained at the technical college in April and May 1943, then went to work in the Halifax shipyards after graduation. We were paid $11 a week while taking the course. This changed to 90 cents an hour when we started at the shipyards. Once we started, we had to sign an agreement that when the veterans came back from overseas we would give up our jobs. We kept working, following orders. Everyone was so happy to have a job that nobody was concerned that the career was untraditional for women.

We wore a lot of protective equipment: we had to be well-covered in case a spark hit in the wrong place or burned through. We had to tuck our hair up under fireproof caps, like skullcaps, and wear big helmets on top. (Most of us decided to keep our hair long rather than cut it short.) We wore combination overalls made of heavy denim, fireproof gloves with sleeves attached, and steel-toed boots. We also had safety glasses. The coated rods were especially dangerous: we had to be careful that the scales from the coating didn't fly up into our faces. But even so, sometimes they would still fly up and get around the glasses – I still have a few scars near my eyes from those rods.

My first job was welding with bare rods, called tack welding. That was touchy, because bare rods seemed to stick a lot quicker than coated rods. I did the pipes that were used to load ammunition onto the ships. After a while I was transferred to the plate shop, welding big plates of metal together. They measured about six feet by ten feet, and were brought over to us by a big crane (also driven by a lady). When we had welded these plates together the crane took them away again, to be used for the sides of the destroyers.

We did electric welding as well. Sometimes we were taken over to the ammunition depot across the yard in Dartmouth. Because of the explosives in the ammunition, we had to change to rubber-soled shoes – we weren't allowed to wear our steel-toed boots in case they caused a spark and blew everything up.

In December, I was told to go down and weld inside one of the ships, where there was no ventilation. I developed pneumonia and became so sick I couldn't work. I had to go back home to my mother and stepfather and spend three months in bed recovering. But when I went back to Halifax in April 1944, my job at the shipyard was gone – a veteran had returned to take it.

I lived with my cousins again, and found a job at the Simpson's lunch counter. My male cousin, who was in the Army, worked just across the street. One evening he introduced me to a nice and very polite young man – that was when I met my future husband. I admired his uniform so much! He was afraid I was going to run off with a sailor, because there were so many of them – Halifax was a great city for sailors.

In September 1939, an uncle who had been in the American army came home, bringing with him a bride and children. He got a job looking after the lighthouse on an offshore island, five miles off the mainland.

I went out to live with them for a year, taking a course in regular schooling by correspondence. I enjoyed the wide-open spaces, having a warm bed and good food. There were the two little boys and a little girl to play with, as well as a couple of his sister's children my uncle had taken in. He had chickens out there, and even cows – we were quite a collection. We would often fish for perch down by the wharf. There were always plenty of ships going by, and all the people on deck would wave at us. We thought it was great.

My aunt was expecting a baby while we were on the lighthouse, and she went into labour in the middle of a bad storm. We couldn't get to shore; so my uncle, with his year of medical training from the army, became the doctor. I gathered the children together and we all went up to the top of the lighthouse, where the big light was, until the baby was born and the all-clear given.

I only stayed on the island for a year. After I was well from pneumonia, in December 1943, I went back to the city. I noticed that the service uniforms had been changed – they were the same for all branches, army, navy and air force. It was disconcerting, as you couldn't tell who was in what arm. There weren't nearly as many service people as there had been, either.

Things were much more plentiful too: finance companies seemed to be appearing on every corner, and people could get fridges, stoves and cars. And in July 1945, I married that courteous boy. He was discharged from the army and came home to the valley in 1946.

My experiences during the war certainly changed my life. During the war, women could do things they weren't traditionally supposed to do. There were so many jobs we weren't allowed to be in until then. I think we came out of those experiences much more independent and self-assured. Women have so many choices now, and I think that's a good thing – it's nice that women are no longer criticized for what they want to do. Today, my daughter-in-law is appalled that I agreed to give up my job after the war!

My advice to the next generation is to get an education – and when you're old enough, join the service. It's a wonderful opportunity. In my day, I don't believe anyone felt any differently towards the women who entered the services – they were very well accepted, and happy in their work. But I've always regretted that I myself didn't tell that one lie and get in.

Lieutenant-Colonel Harriet Sloan

I was a student nurse at the Vancouver General Hospital when Canada declared war. At the time I wondered whether I would be able to serve with one of the medical branches of the armed forces.

So early in 1941, I applied to the Royal Canadian Navy and the Royal Canadian Air Force for a position as a military nurse. But both told me that they had more than enough nurses – there was a constant flow of applicants throughout the conflict.

I had also written to the army headquarters in Regina with a similar plea; and to my surprise, I was called for an interview with a senior medical officer. After a short interview, he asked how quickly I could arrange for a medical examination. I was accepted, and soon reported to the Regina Military Hospital (then a series of linked huts in the fairgrounds, covered with tar paper). I began my military career as a Second Lieutenant Nursing Sister – 2-Lt (N/S) – in the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps (RCAMC).

I started work in a civilian nurse's uniform, but was quickly kitted out in military uniform – though at first I was at a loss how to put all the bits together! A friendly colleague helped me. A large safety pin attached the stiff white collar to the neck of the beautiful blue tunic, and the collar was anchored by running a shoelace through its ends and fastening it to a second safety pin in my bra. I learned how to starch and fold the white organdy veil that replaced my nurse's cap; it was a flattering and feminine head cover.

Shortly after my arrival, there was an outbreak of scarlet fever in the garrison. There were so many victims that it was necessary to set up double-decker bunks on the floor of the armoury. Since I had come from a hospital with a separate isolation building, I wondered how the men would fare: we had no gowns and masks to prevent cross-infection between patients. Treatment was simple: sulpha tablets for their fevers, lots of fluids, calamine lotion for the rashes. But the outbreak lasted only for a few weeks, and all the patients survived. They were fundamentally healthy young men whose morale was high. This was my first experience in improvisation – how to care for large numbers without all the equipment, and with good results. This lesson was useful throughout the war.

My second posting was to Dundurn Camp, near Saskatoon. Here there was a permanent hospital building with operating rooms, central supply, etc. The camp had been built during the Depression as a make-work project, and had provided housing for many unemployed men.

One day some of the Engineers invited some of the Sisters for a ride on a mobile target they had built. It was mounted on a pumper car, similar to those used to inspect railway tracks. Somehow I lost my balance and fell forward; and the front axle rolled up my back and stopped across my neck. The result was a number of compression fractures of the spine. I had to be hospitalized, and it took almost a year for the fractures to heal. I was upset, because I had wanted to be posted overseas. When I was well again, I was posted to a small station hospital near Saskatoon. One visitor we had was our Matron-in-Chief, Colonel Elizabeth Smellie, who was making a cross-country tour. I had the opportunity to speak with her, and told her that I was afraid I wouldn't have the chance to go overseas because of my injury. Not long afterwards, I received a posting to Europe. I thought she was a magical and wonderful woman!

I sailed from Halifax with a group of reinforcement sisters and medical officers, on the *SS Cavina* – a banana boat! It was very small, it only carried 190 passengers. We were part of a much larger convoy. It was a long and stormy trip: several of the sisters were so ill that they hadn't even the strength to stay in their bunks. Their mattresses were placed on the cabin floors, and there they rolled back and forth with every pitch of the ship.

When we arrived in Liverpool, I learned that I was posted as a reinforcement to 8 CGH (Canadian General Hospital). The unit had been formed in Saskatchewan, so it was very nice to be with people from the same part of Canada. I didn't know anyone but it wasn't difficult to fit in – everyone was welcoming and helpful. The hospital, The Duke of Connaught, was in Farnborough, close to Aldershot and an hour by train from London. It had been in use since Florence Nightingale's time, and the older section had large wards and high windows, and was heated by fireplaces (which made it difficult to keep the wards clean, with all the soot). As well, a new modern section had been built behind the main building. We sisters lived five to a cottage in former NCO married quarters.

The first actual casualties I cared for had been practising throwing hand grenades. One grenade had rolled back into the throwing bay, and a number of men had been badly wounded by shrapnel. It was shattering to see their wounds. I had worked on a large trauma ward in Vancouver, caring for patients from industrial and forestry accidents, explosions on fishing boats and so on – but not these kinds of wounds.

As D-Day approached, 8CGH was one of the hospitals chosen to move to Normandy, and the building was gradually emptied. The sisters were issued with battledress – the British Women's Army issue, made of fine wool and very soft compared to the battledress issued to Canadian troops. (We had time to have it tailored to fit us, which was a luxury then.) The uniform consisted of a khaki tunic, skirt, slacks, khaki cotton shirts, ties, and beautiful brown British lace-up boots. Canvas gaiters buckled around the ankles and held the slacks in place. We also received woollen vests (as the English call undershirts) that were so long they reached my feet, long johns that reached up to my armpits, and long, coarse, woollen lisle stockings. As well, they issued us each a khaki raincoat.

The field equipment we were given included a collapsible canvas cot, a yellow canvas water bucket and a water bottle, grey blankets, a steel helmet, mess tins, an enamel washbasin and a collapsible stand for it, and a white armband with a red cross. All this (except for the cot and the washstand) had to be carried in packs attached to our webbing, which crossed at the back, went over the shoulders and attached to our waist belts. Then we were considered more or less equipped to nurse in the field.

Our unit moved to Yorkshire, near the town of Richmond, for field training. We were billetted in a manor house there at first, though we later moved into tents. We went on long route marches, and gradually became used to carrying our packs. Our boots softened and our tendons stretched and then marching became a pleasant thing. The spring was beautiful. The meadows were full of buttercups and daisies, with primroses around the bases of the trees. We could go into Richmond on the weekends – we'd take the bus in, see the sights and go for fish and chips. It was a peaceful time for us.

But then it was D-Day, and the invasion of Normandy. We worried about our friends, who might have landed in the first wave. My unit was ready to move south; but just at this time, I developed a cough and a high fever, and had to be bundled up and taken to a hospital in Darlington. I think they thought of me as their first war casualty! The patients and even the visitors there were wonderfully kind, showering me with flowers and precious eggs. But I was afraid that, once again, I would miss the move because of being in hospital.

But again, I was saved by our well-loved Matron-in-Chief. Col. Agnes Campbell Neill came to say good-bye to the sisters; she also came to see me, and assured me that I would be reunited with the unit.

That was such a thoughtful and kind thing to do for one lone nursing sister, and typical of Miss Neill.

We moved by train to Brighton and were billeted in hotels, where we slept on the floor in our sleeping bags. It was there that we saw our first V1s, or buzz bombs, as they were called. They were like small airplanes with a red light in the tail, and they put-putted along over the channel heading for London. At some point the engine would cut out, they would fall to the ground, and the bomb would explode – nasty things.

Our next move was a short one, to a concentration area near Southampton. There we received more equipment to squeeze into our already-bulging packs. This included two 24-hour ration packs; cigarettes and matches in waterproof containers; an emergency ration (chocolate, powdered eggs and powdered milk) packed in a tin; French invasion francs (printed in England); and black vomit bags.

About midnight on July 18, 1944, we set sail in our Landing Craft Tank (LCT). The deck was so narrow that you could sit with your legs dangling over the side. The crew served us Spam sandwiches and tea, and also dipped up buckets of seawater so we could wash ourselves.

LCTs were the type of craft used to transport tanks: the front of the vessel could be lowered to form a ramp. Below, we found tiers of bunks four deep. There was only one toilet, and the fumes from it and the engine made for an unpleasant atmosphere. Sometime during the night we were rammed, with a tremendous noise. We learned then that the black vomit bags were a useful commodity!

We landed at Mulberry, the famous prefabricated harbour that was towed from England to Arromanches in France. (Thousands of people went ashore after D-Day from this dock). The British Tommies on the dock poured hot tea into our mugs – delicious.

Then, cheered by the troops, we moved along the dusty road by lorry to our new home west of Bayeux. Here we found all the equipment needed to operate a 600-bed hospital waiting for us: hundreds of tons of canvas, cots, blankets, instruments, cooking equipment, not to mention personnel. Everything we needed to become operational was right there in those meadows. It seemed incredible that our small unit could move from the UK to Normandy, and find itself in the right place at the right time – the logistics of moving one small unit was mind-boggling.

We spent our first night as guests of 7CGH, and then set to work to establish our own hospital. While the men dealt with the heavy work of erecting the canvas hospital, the sisters made masses of dressings. We also erected our 60-lb tents in an apple orchard, two sisters to a tent. We set up our cots, unrolled our sleeping bags, and strung a line between the tent poles for hanging our washing. Our tin trunks became our dressing tables: they contained extra shirts, underwear, a few books and some civilian clothes.

At night we were often disturbed by anti-aircraft fire, and shrapnel fell on our lines. The CO issued us with metal hospital cots and mattresses. The proper drill was to take your sleeping bag and crawl under the bed with the local livestock – moles, mice and lizards. You had two choices: go under the bed, or stay on the cot with your steel helmet over your face and your washbasin over your tummy.

Our tent "wards" consisted of two large marquees, each holding 30 beds. A connecting tent was used as a combination office, supply room (for keeping dressing trays and supplies of medication) and kitchen – complete with enamel bowls and plates, an improvement over mess tins. At the back of this area was a smaller tent, holding only15 beds, where we held our most gravely wounded casualties. The food was delivered in hayboxes carried on stretchers from the field kitchen. There was no running water, and no floors; we worked on the grass, which quickly became worn down to bare earth. Hurricane lamps gave us light at night.

We worked 12-hour shifts. The convoys of sick and wounded arrived day and night. The wounded were everlastingly grateful for such simple comforts as a cot or stretcher to lie on, a shave, a bath, a hot meal – and best of all, a chance to sleep. Our wounded boys were so brave: they endured unrelenting pain, and rough, jolting, dusty rides in ambulances, all without complaining. Their compassion for one another was unending. The man without a leg would feed or hold a cigarette for the man with no hands. The seeing cared for the blind and led them. They hopped about helping the sisters in whatever way they could. And they would cry when someone died, especially the young. We were privileged to look after them; and in turn, the men loved and respected the sisters – from the "Bluebirds" of 1914-1918 (so called for their blue uniforms), to their descendants in battledress and combat gear today.

The sisters of the Second World War and their patients were blessed by medical advances denied their predecessors – it seems that medical science is one good thing that comes out of war. Sodium Pentothal was available, and widely used as an anaesthetic. The patient was quickly unconscious, and regained consciousness after surgery with few post-operative discomforts. Tobruk splints made transporting patients with femur wounds easier and more comfortable. And we had penicillin, which at that time was a miracle. All war wounds are filthy, and we gave the patients penicillin by injection every three hours. It must have saved thousands upon thousands of lives.

We also had the benefit of a good blood supply system. We needed gallons of plasma to replace body fluids. The blood transfusion teams delivered dried plasma and blood together with the administration apparatus. The blood products were mixed with normal saline and given intravenously. All we had to do was dump the used equipment back into the boxes for the team to retrieve when they delivered fresh supplies. It was very time-saving for us not to have to clean the equipment – and very handy, since there wasn't much hot water around.

There were specialty surgical teams for maxillo-facial wounds, cranial-cerebral wounds, and penetrating wounds of the chest. There was an excellent evacuation system too. Once patients were conscious and stable, the RCAF flew them back in Dakotas to base hospitals in the UK.

Also in Normandy was a group of soldiers called the British Pioneers, who for various reasons had been judged unfit to serve in other branches of the army. We had a company of them with us the whole time that we were in France, and they worked extremely hard. These men unloaded the stretchers from the ambulances and carried the casualties to triage, to X-ray, to the wards, to the operating room, and back to the wards. They would do any digging needed. There was an awful amount of mud at the entrance to the hospital, so these Pioneers made a temporary road out of metal mesh interwoven with tree branches to allow the ambulances to get into the hospital area. They did such heavy work, until they almost dropped. You'd ask them how it was going and their cheerful reply was, "Not so bad, sister, just give us another cup of tea."(That lovely sweet tea!) They were remarkable men.

All sisters have high praise for the men who supported them in their work. The orderlies could be relied upon to work hard and long in often-desperate situations. They gave their skills lovingly and cheerfully, and their humour lightened many a dreary day. Their invaluable assistance permitted the sisters to concentrate on the more seriously wounded or acutely ill.

One personal blessing I had was the gift of a little gas stove, a treasured possession. It was made by one of the British REMEs (Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers), from parts collected from a dump. A cut-down tin biscuit box fitted the burner exactly. It was wonderful to have hot water for bathing.

Also treasured were the skills of Mary Attree, our dietician, and the cooks. When we travelled, they would make us packets of Spam or jam sandwiches. We also had slabs of a stuff called Compo, which was dried tea leaves mixed with powdered milk and sugar. You just broke off a chunk, popped it into an enamel pot, poured on boiling water, and you had a mug of tea. It was hot, sweet, warming and good for keeping up your energy. In early September, we moved to a village near Rouen – again in a farmer's field. We had just finished setting up when the rains came. We sloshed and slithered about in the mud wearing raincoats, steel helmets and rubber boots, in an effort to keep at least partially dry. We didn't look like ministering angels in those get-ups! It was getting cold too, and I would prepare to go on night duty by tucking a hot water bottle into the back of my tunic. But, the convoys of wounded still came. The cold was especially uncomfortable for our patients, and the grey days made the ward tents gloomy.

Wherever we went, we left behind a small cemetery. (After the war, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission moved the bodies to the beautifully maintained war cemeteries in Italy, France, Germany, Holland and the Far East.)

Again we were on the move – this time to the beautiful city of Antwerp, in Belgium. The hospital was a two-storey building, with many wards connected by long corridors. I believe in peacetime, it had been used for Belgian veterans of the First World War. German medical personnel were on duty there when we moved in, and some remained and worked with us. It was wonderful to be inside, with lights, running water – and proper beds! No more kneeling on the ground to care for patients on low cots or stretchers.

Ten of us were billeted in a lovely mansion – a remarkable contrast to living in a tent. Germans had recently occupied the house, as evidenced by mail in the mailbox and dirty dishes in the kitchen; but it was lovely anyway. The entrance hall had a double plate-glass door, protected by an elaborate iron grille. A marble staircase led up to a panelled drawing room. The large dining room held a crystal chandelier and glass cupboards lined with mirrors. It overlooked the garden through another plate-glass wall, and off it was a glass-brick patio protected by a glass canopy. Four of us shared a large room; it had tall double doors lacquered in scarlet, with heavy brass hardware – and beside my cot was a large stained glass window.

But all this glass was to prove highly dangerous when, shortly after our arrival, V2 rockets started falling on the city. These were the great-grand-daddies of our present-day rockets, but I was told that one fell on Antwerp every 20 minutes. They concentrated on the fine Antwerp harbour – if that could be destroyed, the Allies would have a long haul for their supplies from the Channel ports. Fortunately, the harbour remained intact; but the destruction in the city was enormous. Unlike the V1s, there was no warning buzz from the V2s – just the terrific explosion as it fell.

Well, of course with bombs falling, living in a glass house was horrible! For all its elegance, it turned out to be the very worst place to be – it was a miracle we survived. We quickly learned to keep all the doors and windows open, so the blasts wouldn't destroy everything. When some reinforcements arrived later, they were assigned to live downstairs, in the glassiest part of the house. A couple of them wound up sleeping under the grand piano. And because of the frequent explosions, for a short time I developed a nervous tic: my right forearm would jerk up. It was very embarrassing.

But despite the V2s, we remained in Antwerp from September 30 1944 until December 18. Again, the convoys of wounded poured in. They were unending. The lights blazed night and day, and the operating tables were never empty. The British maxillo-facial team joined the hospital, and then all the casualties with face, throat and jaw wounds came to us. The plastic surgery these skilled surgeons performed on shattered faces and jaws made an amazing difference in the patients' appearance. The initial temporary measures included delicately suturing up noses, and building up jaws using fine steel rods and wires that would set and support the lower jaw. Part of the treatment included sulphathiazole tablets every four hours. We powdered the tablets as finely as possible, placed then on the tip of a teaspoon or eye dropper with some water, and gave the drug a sip at a time to men with parts of their faces – a tongue, a nose, a cheek – shot away. It took infinite patience and much time, but the result was heartwarming.

Nearly all these patients had tracheotomy tubes in their throats, and a partial tongue could easily slip into the throat and cut off the trachea. Then it was essential to turn them quickly onto their side and administer oxygen. One of the orderlies I worked with was a German, who had been a barber in Hamburg before the war. He was a warm and caring man, and adept at observing the patients and assisting them. (Later, these patients would be transferred to the No. 1 Neurological and Plastic Surgery Hospital in Basingstoke, England. This famous Canadian hospital treated hundreds of men who were dreadfully burned, or had head and spinal injuries.) We also had with us a special Canadian neurological team; and a British team that cared for casualties with throat and chest wounds.

In December 1944, our unit was reassigned to Holland. I was to be a member of the advance party, going ahead of the main body to set things up. The hospital was torn down and packed up: the collapsible bedside tables knocked down, the blankets rolled up like carpets and tied into bundles. Everything was ready, and we were to leave the next day.

But then – when the hospital was dismantled and every piece of equipment packed – a V2 made a direct hit in the heart of the city. Many people were on leave there, enjoying the cinema. It was awful! Hundreds were killed, and hundreds more wounded. Everyone was called in to work, and everything had to be frantically unpacked to receive the casualties pouring in – covered with plaster dust and blood. The dead were brought in along with the living, and the morgue quickly filled. I remember speaking to one young British soldier, and asking him how he had made out. He said, "It wasn't too bad sister, they kept handing us down cups of tea as they dug us out." That young lad was dead in a few hours. The blast had collapsed his lungs, even though there was no mark on him.

But at 4 a.m. the next day, we left Antwerp behind, got onto the lorries and headed for St. Michielsgestel in southern Holland. The hospital was a former seminary, later used as a prison for Dutch political prisoners. The chapel was stripped of its pews and converted into a triage reception area, and the classrooms were now our wards. It was very dirty; but the sisters had individual rooms – such luxury! There were wooden cupboards where we stored our clothes and treasures. (You had to knock before opening them, though, so that a mouse didn't jump out into your face.) In the attics where the walking wounded rested, rats would run along the overhead heating pipes. I was always afraid that one would land on my head. On Christmas Eve, our CO told us that there might be an invasion by German paratroopers, and the sisters might have to be evacuated by ship from nearby Bergen-op-Zoom. Luckily, this didn't happen; and on Christmas Day, one of the neighbouring regiments came for Christmas dinner. We set up long tables in the auditorium, covered with white sheets and decorated with snowmen (made from bottles covered with white cotton batting, and decorated with top hats, buttons and noses made from the black paper that came with x-ray film). At the end of the dinner, the men all received a bag of hard candy and an orange – which they handed to the Dutch children waiting outside as they left. It was very moving – the sisters cried, and so did the men.

In January 1945 there was an outbreak of diphtheria, and we cared for a number of very ill men. Diphtheria was more deadly than scarlet fever: its main symptom was a very sore throat. A membrane could actually grow over the trachea, or windpipe. Our only treatment was to give alcohol-and-water baths to keep the fever down, and to give penicillin. It seems I gave penicillin to everyone! As with all infectious illnesses, having people in close quarters and in bad conditions didn't help – it was difficult to maintain isolation techniques.

Then began the push to the Rhine and beyond. It was a very busy time. Our records indicated that during the 33-day period starting on February 7, the hospital performed 1,600 surgeries, and received, treated and evacuated more than 18,000 casualties.

After this hectic time, the flow of casualties slackened somewhat. By early May there were rumours of peace; and on V-E Day, May 8, we had a quiet time. The padres conducted services of thanksgiving, that no more young men would die through enemy action. But there were still thousands of young Canadians who would suffer for years – if not for a lifetime – from their grievous wounds.

That night we had a great party; and the next day, people from the nearest village came bearing gifts of flowers and eggs. They brought their band: the bass drum was on a little wagon, pulled by a boy, and the drummer came behind beating on his instrument. Every villager was wearing something orange in honour of their royal family, the House of Orange: the little girls had orange hair ribbons, and the men had orange armbands. Best of all, they were flying their own flags! – hidden away during years of Nazi occupation. The band played the Dutch national anthem and *O Canada*. The Burgomaster made a speech of thanks, and our CO responded. It was delightful – liberation at last!

Then the other Canadians headed back to Canada, were demobbed and returned to peacetime life. But I decided to stay in the Medical Corps because of the warm friendships I had enjoyed during my military experience – as well as the teamwork, and the opportunity to enhance my skills as a nurse.

In September 1946 I was appointed as a Lt (N/S) to the Canadian Army (Active), one of the original thirty nursing sisters to join the RCAMC. After unification of the three services in 1959, the RCAMC became the Canadian forces Medical Service (CFMS).

My hope in joining RCAMC was that I could continue to make soldiers lives' more comfortable in times of illness or accident. My varied experiences there included ward duties, working in operating rooms, and three postings as a teacher at the RCAMC School, which later became the Canadian Forces Medical Services Training Centre at Camp Borden. My time there was spent mostly on preparing Medical Assistants for the various levels of their trade: there was time to attend both university and military courses. As one was promoted, one had many opportunities to develop skills in planning, organization and leadership. After the war, it was again possible to serve in Europe with the NATO forces. At one point I was stationed at the British Military Hospital in Isherlohn, Germany. We shared the nursing care of military personnel and their dependants with our British counterparts in the Queen Alexandria Royal Army Medical Corps. We had the opportunity to visit many European countries, and a chance to learn about societies different from our own.

My final posting was to the Office of the Surgeon General in Ottawa, where for two years I was responsible for the career planning and postings of nurses in the services. I spent the last four years as a Lieutenant-Colonel and Matron-in-Chief (a now-archaic term). So ended twenty-seven years of a challenging and exciting military career that covered an infinite variety of work situations. It was a happy and fulfilling period of my life, shared with countless friends – the best parts of all were the many friendships I made, that I treasure to this day.

Although we nursing sisters were few in number among the thousands of servicemen and servicewomen, we counted. As Field Marshall Montgomery once said: "The most important people in the army are the nursing sisters and the padres – the sisters because they tell the men they matter to us, and the padres because they tell the men they matter to God." That was a warm tribute to all the Sisters who served at home or abroad during the Second World War.

Barbara Power –
née Good

I applied to join the Women's Division of the RCAF soon after its formation – the air force sounded like the most interesting of the services. In my eagerness to be part of the action, I was less than truthful: I told the recruiters I was 21, the minimum age for entry at that time. In fact, I was only 19; but this couldn't be verified easily, because I was born in England. My parents weren't too happy at my joining the air force, and I myself didn't really know what I was getting into.

(Initially women were recruited mostly by posters. For the publicity material, naturally they chose the best-looking girls. The idea was that you'd think, "Maybe I'd look like that in an air force uniform!")

I passed the medical and in the spring of 1942 was sent off to Rockcliffe Air Base in Ottawa for basic training. I had never been to Eastern Canada before. It was quite an eye-opener crossing the country by train, stopping to pick up other trainee airwomen along the way. It was just after Easter when we got there, still in our Easter finery with straw hats and high heels. When our uniforms were issued, we had no way of sending the civilian clothes home, apart from one small carton allowed by the air force; so we gaily tossed them into the garbage. We hoped the civilian staff found a use for them.

After several weeks of basic training at Rockcliffe, including learning drill (which is marching and formation), we were sent to St. Thomas, Ontario, for trade training. I was to become a "clerk accountant," which meant bookkeeping. After graduation I was posted to Aylmer, near London, which was a Flying Training School where aircraft pilots received their wings. Pilots from all over the Commonwealth, plus many Americans who had come up to Canada and joined the RCAF, were there for training. We WDs slept in double-decker bunks in barracks blocks. The barracks were H-shaped, with "ablutions" (washroom facilities: bathtubs, showers, wash basins and toilets) in the centre. We paraded in the mornings, and then were marched off to our duties. I worked in HQ office keeping pay accounts.

In due course I became a corporal, a rank I kept until the end of the war. But I was frustrated, because my applications to go overseas were ignored. Then I discovered that because I was so good at my accounting job, my superiors didn't want me to go – they had been blocking all my applications. I decided to take matters into my own hands and wrote to my father's former secretary, now a postings officer in Ottawa. I told him that my father would be pleased if I could go overseas. (In truth, my father wouldn't and wasn't!) My boss was also unhappy at the prospect of my leaving. But I received a posting anyway, to London, England.

I was given two weeks' embarkation leave before shipping out, with a train ticket home and another to the point of departure, which was Halifax. We stayed in Halifax for several weeks, living in barracks, until everything was ready for the *Queen Mary's* voyage. Packing for the trip was a problem: try getting all your worldly goods into one little kit bag! We wanted to take civilian clothes for when we went on leave. (We knew that in Ireland we couldn't wear our uniforms, because the country was neutral.) We were supposed to carry our bulging kit bags as we marched down to the docks; but luckily the authorities relented at the last minute and put them on trucks.

The ship was jammed: there were 22,000 men and 30 women aboard. Airmen and junior NCOs had to share hammocks: they spent half their time in them, and the other half on deck. And because there wasn't enough space or organization for three meals a day, we only had two – no lunch!

One of the absurdities of the service was that NCOs and Other Ranks (which was what we were) couldn't fraternize with commissioned officers. This seemed absurd because we WDs messed with the senior officers. There we were, eating and socializing with Admirals and Air Marshals – yet we weren't permitted to even visit a brother or husband on the ship, if he were a Pilot Officer or a Flying Officer.

As I was in charge of our unit, I had to wake everyone up in the morning and account for them. We'd go for breakfast and then have boat drill, learning what to do if we were torpedoed. We had to keep those wretched gas masks draped about our persons at all times. We spent our free time walking on deck or playing cards.

We had no convoy – the *Queen Mary* was so fast that no escort could keep up with her. In five days we landed in Greenock, near Glasgow. We were sent by train to Bournemouth, and were stationed in luxury hotels that the RAF had taken over. I was posted to Base Accounts Unit in London, in an office located in the rear half of Harrods department store in Knightsbridge. I was quartered with two other WDs in "mews flats" – former stables converted into apartments, which nowadays are extremely fashionable and wildly expensive. My flatmates were both married and – a great bonus – they could both cook! We all kept a motherly eye on each other. On the whole, we WDs had a lot of personal freedom. Our time outside duty hours was our own, and we could change into civvies if we wished. (Navy girls had to live in barracks all the time.)

There was a lot to get used to in war-torn London: V1 and V2 rockets, firebombs and high explosives. Being bombed was quite horrifying. If the air raid sirens went off while we were at work, our instructions were to grab our ledgers (which weighed a ton), run five floors down with them to the basement, and stay there until the "All Clear" had sounded. Often, we'd no sooner hear the All Clear, run up the five flights with the ledgers and get our work organized again, than another warning would sound – and the whole procedure would have to be repeated.

At first, no one knew what those wretched little buzz bombs were. They appeared overhead going "Buzz, buzz, buzz," exactly like an old-fashioned alarm clock; and when the engine cut out they went straight down and exploded on contact. The authorities didn't realize at first that they weren't aircraft, so the sirens were sounding constantly – we were exhausted from running up and down all those stairs. And the V2s were even worse, being silent and much bigger. They did a lot of damage.

Our sleep was often interrupted by air raid sirens. In our flat, my bed was right under a skylight and I could see V1s and V2s crossing the sky. If one stopped overhead and I heard that buzzing, there was no time to do anything – no matter how sleepy I was, I had to get out of bed and out of range of the glass skylight, in case the doodlebug landed nearby. (One time some friends and I had just moved to a new flat, when that very evening the one we had vacated received a direct hit and was demolished. We had moved just in time!)

Grocery shopping was always an adventure because of the severe rationing. We used to take turns going with our coupons to the store where we were registered and collecting our rations. We were issued "points" to buy items that were in limited supply but not on the ration list, such as jam and tinned goods. You had to budget the money, the coupons and the points with great care.

I remember once when it was my turn to do the week's shopping at the grocery store where we bought our rations, across the street from Harrods. It was Saturday after work, and I had picked up meat, tinned goods and vegetables and packed them in a heavy brown paper bag with handles, which I had been saving for that purpose. With all the groceries in, it was quite heavy; and as I struggled out to where I'd left my bicycle, the bag burst! The meat had leaked through (they were never too lavish with the wrapping paper), and all those tins, apples, onions and potatoes were running all over the street. It was dreadful!

As I chased them, I realized that I now had nothing to put them in – I couldn't even take off my jacket and wrap them in that, as I had to be in proper uniform. Everyone in our building who could have helped me was long gone. Then a group of senior accounts officers came out – they must have been at a meeting, and were the last ones out. They were my only hope.

"Heavens, how are you going to get all that home?" one of them asked.

"I don't know," I replied. "It's simply terrible, I can't manage all this and my bicycle too."

"Where do you live?" one of the Wing Commanders asked.

I told him, and he said, "I'll take your bicycle." He did, and it was the funniest thing: he was rather portly and walked with his toes out, and there he was riding down the street on my ladies' bicycle, knees nearly up to his chin. The other officers helped me gather my groceries and put them into the dry side of the bag, then held them for me while I dug out my money for the bus. I still laugh when I think of it: the W/C wobbling off on my bicycle and me clutching those groceries that had been all over Knightsbridge.

Another time it was my flatmate's turn to go shopping. She was also supposed to pick up tickets for us to see Shakespeare's *Henry the Fifth* at the Old Vic. She stopped at the theatre on her way home with the groceries, and was discussing the seating plan with the woman in the box office when behind her a beautiful voice said, "Well, for Shakespeare you'd be better to sit in there" – pointing over her shoulder at the seating plan. She turned around to find that the speaker was Laurence Olivier! She got so excited and dithery that she paid for the tickets and came waltzing home with stars in her eyes.

She said "I've just had a conversation with Laurence Olivier!"

We said, "Oh, good – where are the rations?"

It turned out she had left all our week's rations at the theatre! She certainly wasn't very popular.

There was a man on the radio every night, broadcasting from Germany, who spoke with an upper-class British accent. The British forces nicknamed him "Lord Haw-Haw." (I can't remember his name, but he was infamous as a traitor). One day, he said on his broadcast: "The Canadian air force had better watch out, because we're going for Harrods tonight." That was a clear attempt to intimidate us. What could we do? We put on extra fire watches that night. Fortunately the buzz bombs were small and their aim wasn't exact, so they didn't get our office. We were lucky – it would have caused chaos with the records. (But unfortunately, our grocery store across the road was completely destroyed.)

I explored London rather well, mostly by bicycle: we were able to get around easily that way, since there was comparatively little traffic – only some buses, taxis and official cars. I was lucky to have family in various parts of England: a grandmother and some aunts and cousins. I spent leaves with all of them. I wasn't able to get down to the West of Ireland to visit my aunts there, unfortunately; but I did stay with some friends in Ireland.

On the whole, the men in the service were very nice to us – we weren't taking away their jobs. But we did sometimes resent the promotions always going to the men, and being paid much less. As AW2s we were paid 90 cents a day – you couldn't get up to much mischief on that! And some civilians were most unpleasant; they thought we spent our time getting up to all sorts of immoral behaviour. I was most indignant when I found this out: mostly we were ordinary, fairly nice girls, with not much in common with the odd bad apple. Sure, there were a few unwanted pregnancies – but some people thought that sort of behaviour was the norm. It certainly wasn't!

I remember when the D-Day invasions started. I was helping a friend prepare her trousseau – she was engaged to be married to an officer in the Tank Corps. Then her fiancé phoned to say that if they were going to get married, it had to be the very next day. They had the wedding down at his mess, then went off to a hotel to spend the night. He was called away to duty at 4 a.m. for D-Day. At morning parade and throughout the day, we could hear the guns from along the French coast.

When the war in Europe ended, we were given the day off work and everyone was whooping around. We went down to Buckingham Palace, where the cheering crowds were packed like sausages. King George VI, the Queen, the princesses Elizabeth and Margaret and the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, kept coming out onto the balcony to wave to us. The crowd was so dense that we all held each other's hands as hard as we could – still, I lost everyone I was with, and didn't find them till we got home again! But it didn't matter, because everybody was so euphoric. It was a marvellous feeling – though we knew we still had the Japanese to cope with.

It was after V-J Day that I met my future husband. Many of my women friends and most of the men had gone back to Canada, but I was still living in a big flat in Kensington with other WDs. For Christmas, we invited all the "strays" still left in England who didn't have any friends there. Flora, one of my flatmates, invited a Canadian air force officer named Pen, who had just returned from Italy and was alone for the holidays.

The day before Christmas Eve, the doorbell rang – and here was this fellow with a huge tin of tomato juice (I hadn't seen one of those since I left Canada) and two bottles of whisky under his arm. He said, "I am Pen Power, and I've come for Christmas."

"Come in," I replied, with my eyes on the tomato juice. The whisky was very welcome too, as liquor was strictly rationed.

Another friend was having a cocktail party that night, and the three of us – Flora, Pen and myself – went to help consume her case of rum, a parting gift from an officer who had been in charge of his mess. People came in droves and the party went on all night. When we got home, Flora and Pen decided to have a nightcap of the whisky Pen had brought. I disapproved, pointing out that they had already had quite enough rum, and that it was well into Christmas Eve morning. Pen told Flora: "Don't take any notice of that poor type." I was infuriated, and flounced off to bed.

Later that day Pen, who was staying at the Red Cross, came back. Both he and Flora had horrendous headaches – well earned, I thought! Flora asked me to try to be nice to Pen, even though I had taken such a dislike to him, so that I wouldn't spoil Christmas. I promised to do my best – and discovered that he improved greatly on closer acquaintance, even though he did have a horrible hangover.

Instead of returning to Bournemouth, he decided to stay in London for New Year's Eve. I disengaged myself from my Australian date, and the three of us went to a nightclub with a party of Flora's friends. As midnight ushered in 1946, Pen and I were sitting at a table getting engaged.

Since married women in the service were automatically sent home, my engagement meant I had to disengage myself from going to Germany. I had signed on for the occupation, but now had to change my plans. I asked the Canadian air force to release me from service and send me home; it refused. But after a little pressure was exerted (Pen's father was the Minister for Air in the wartime cabinet) it changed its mind.

Coming home, we WDs were on a much smaller troop ship – again with no convoy, because the war was over, and again with only two meals a day! Also on board was an army friend of Pen's, one of whose officers had just had his appendix removed. Since this man didn't come to meals, Ted would snag his bacon and toast every morning – and he and I would meet and share a bacon sandwich for lunch.

There were quite a few war brides on board, and I was anxiously awaiting my own wedding. We arrived home in May, and I stopped over in Quebec to meet Pen and his parents and family in Quebec City. Then I went home to Vancouver, and we were married there as soon as he finished his bar exams.

Looking back on the war years in London, I realize how hard it was for us. It's difficult to imagine now: we were only in our early twenties, yet many of our friends were being killed. You'd make plans to get together with a friend the next time he was in London – and then his chips were called in. But we didn't have any choice; we couldn't just have put up with the Nazis and their way of life. If we had to do it again, I'm sure we would. At least we were young and resilient – it's astonishing what you're capable of when you're young. You have resources and a great deal of courage when you're pushed.

And on the whole, we were a light-hearted bunch. The only family we had on hand was each other, so we looked after each other in our difficulties. Most of us hadn't known each other that long, but we went through so much together that some of those friendships are as strong now as ever, and can be seamlessly revived after many years of absence. A few years ago, I went to India with an American friend with whom I'd shared a flat. We hadn't seen each other for over twenty years, but we just picked up where we had left off.

If I were to join up now, I'd like to learn to fly – in my day we weren't allowed to train for air crew. But what I remember most about the Royal Canadian air force was the feeling of being part of the action. I wouldn't have missed that for the world.

Jean Nixon

Before the war started, I was working in Toronto as a First Aid attendant in a laundry and dry cleaner, giving first aid to any injured workers. People brought their clothes, baby diapers, rugs and army blankets in to wash at the laundry, which occupied an entire city block and employed some six hundred workers. At that time I was also a Girl Guide and an active member of the St. John Ambulance Brigade corps. I attended public gatherings and did volunteer nursing at the Adult Incurable Home, the General Hospital and the military hospital for the Second World War veterans.

I first heard of the declaration of war while on First Aid duty at the Canadian National Exhibition. It seemed real to me then, because of all the news in the papers and on television that had led up to it. But I didn't experience any dramatic changes in my life when war first broke out. Apart from the laundry working overtime as a result of military contracts, everything seemed the same.

In 1939 I tried to join the war effort with St. John Ambulance, as I felt it was my duty. They weren't enlisting at that time, though, so I changed my mind and decided to join one of the services. What enticed me to leave my parents' home and join the RCAF was speaking with two airmen from Winnipeg who spent their weekend passes at our home. They were Hospital Assistants, and spoke highly of their experiences.

One of the men, Eddy Stubbs, was a former St. John Ambulance member; and he told me how useful his first aid knowledge had been to him in the air force. That – and the smart-looking uniforms! – encouraged me to join the RCAF. My brother had already tried to enlist as a local first aid instructor, but was unable to pass the medical.

He was so disappointed; and when I successfully enlisted, this caused some upset in my family.

We trained at Trenton to become Hospital Assistants. I was the only girl in my family; but going into a barrack room with fourteen girls soon taught me to share. We depended on one another, yet it taught me to stand on my own two feet. My nickname there was "Nicki," short for Nixon.

I was stationed at Trenton Hospital, nursing on the medical and surgical wards. I preferred working on the medical ward, because we did most of the patient care treatment – on the surgical ward the doctors and nursing sisters did all the dressings. We took the patients' pulses, temperatures and respiratory rates, gave bed baths, and were responsible for noticing any change in them – such as pale or flushed colour, becoming weaker or more energetic.

I found that the most difficult aspect of the job was adjusting to working the night shift hours. Finally, a doctor told me that I needed to view the morning, when I finished my shift, as my evening – and to get out and be active until noon, then go to bed. This proved to be good advice, both then and later. (I worked twenty years of night shifts after the war, and even now cannot adjust back to sleeping at night!)

Another minor problem was one nursing sister there, who resented us hospital assistants. The military considered us qualified to care for patients after only a few weeks of training; but it had taken her years to become an RN, and according to her she had had to live in poverty.

One night, something alarming happened. It was the worst snowstorm of the winter, and a pilot flying in couldn't see where the landing field was. Below him were the flying field, the highway, and the frozen Trent River with our station bordering it. The pilot couldn't get his bearings and he was flying so low, and so close to the hospital, that we could clearly see the plane's lights. The crash warning alarm sounded throughout the hospital, extra staff manned the emergency and operating rooms, and the ambulance crew was alerted. The plane flew past the hospital windows again and some of the patients became quite upset, fearing the plane was going to crash into the building. We sat on their beds trying to calm them – mainly because our legs were shaking too much to stand up! But after all that, the pilot landed the plane safely on the frozen river.

At the next CO's inspection, this pilot received an award for saving His Majesty's Aircraft. But the occasion was spoiled for us WDs by the weather, which was well below zero. Standing on the parade square during the winter in our skirts was dreadful: our legs got really cold, both above and below the skirt. On a windy day, wearing a skirt did not make one feel very ladylike!

The first time I was on parade at Trenton, CO Bell was inspecting the ranks. When he reached me, he stopped. Eyeing me from cap to shoes, he said: "This has gone on long enough, and I refuse to tolerate it any longer." How I wished the parade square would open up and swallow me! Then he bent down, tied his shoelace, stood up, smiled, winked and continued along on his inspection! It was then that I realized top-ranking officers had a good sense of humour too.

Two people stand out in my memory from my time in the air force. The first was the lady officer in charge of all WDs on the station. She set a perfect example by her appearance in uniform, had such a pleasant smile (and beautiful red hair), and always put us at ease – whether we were in her office for a discussion, or even being reprimanded!

The other person was the station Padre. He made his rounds of the wards, but with so many patients his time with each one was limited. One Sunday morning when I wasn't on duty, I decided to attend church in town. I stayed for Holy Communion, was late reporting back for afternoon duty, and was put on charge. I spoke with the Padre about this, and said that if we had services available in the hospital there would be no need for staff or patients to leave the station to attend church. Also, patients confined to bed for long periods were missing religious services. Within two weeks, every Sunday morning there was a Catholic and a Protestant service in the hospital.

One incident I still laugh at was when Trenton Station held a Visitor's Day, and each section was asked to enter a float in the parade. For the hospital float we had a long flat truck. There were two men on it: a tall well-built airman with a sign saying "Before" and, separated from him by a bedside screen, a short, frail and slightly built patient sitting on his bed – his sign said "After." We had a band, too: a row of trumpet players and some guitarists. The "trumpets" were men's urinals with corks stuck in the narrow end, and the "guitars" were bedpans with tape strung across the holes! Every so often the bandleader had to run up to the record player on the truck, wind it up and restart the record that was blasting military band music.

But being stationed in Trenton wasn't what I wanted. When I first enlisted in the RCAF, the recruiting officer told me that with my hospital experience I would be soon sent overseas – which was exactly what I wanted. Instead, here I was. But then St. John requested that I be discharged to serve abroad, where I would be given more responsibility. So I left the air force with the rank of WD1. My fondest memories were of the gratitude expressed by patients when they left the hospital.

For the war effort, St. John staffed military and then civilian hospitals in London, England. (The St. John and Red Cross staff were grouped together and referred to as VADs, or Voluntary Aid Detachments.) As more recruits enlisted, according to their experience, they were transferred to the Medical Corps of what was then the Royal Indian Army Service. I was only in the U.K. for a week while preparing to go to India.

Before leaving London, the Indian Army issued us with Royal Indian Army Medical Corps identity cards that had our name, regimental number and blood type. We also received a khaki armband with a large red cross and our regimental number.

As our troop ship sailed into Bombay harbour, the first thing to catch our attention was a large sign on the dock reading: "Welcome to Bombay – But Mum's The Word." Trains were waiting to take us to a transit camp on the outskirts of Poona, where personnel waited for a permanent posting. I was chosen to be stationed there, and so was another St. John member, Francis Stubbs from New Brunswick. (No relation to my other friend Eddy Stubbs!)

So we went to Poona, moved into our new quarters, and the next day we went to a briefing. We were told that the Indian government suspected that the Japanese would attack the country in the near future, and that Japanese spies in India might try to steal our identity cards and armbands. They would return this stolen property to the government and report us as captured – this was to discourage VADs from Britain from enlisting for service in India. We were told never to keep these important items in our kit bags or under our pillows during the night. Two girls at Poona had already woken up to find a hand reaching underneath their pillows. Luckily, when they screamed, the man had fled.

We were also given instructions about eating fruit bought from the village: we had to wash it thoroughly, even with hand soap. You were supposed to roll a banana peel down as you ate it, rather than removing all the peel at once. There were no public washrooms in the fruit groves, so the native pickers went "Johnny on the spot" and used leaves for tissue!

After the meeting we went into town for our first real local meal – quite different from anything I had ever known, and really delicious. We had curried rice, and the largest shrimp I had ever seen. We had to be back at camp before dark, though, because tigers often came out of the jungle at night when there was no traffic on the dirt road.

Our barracks room had about 150 beds. There were three doors on each side of the building, and several windows, but no glass in the frames. India was such a hot country: the temperature would rise up to 110°F during the day, and then drop down again to 40°F at night. An Indian soldier with a rifle was on duty at each door to protect us from intruders.

After a while, Stubbs and I were posted to the military base in Poona and moved into a smaller barracks, which housed the Red Cross and St. John staff. We didn't treat the real war victims, just the regular surgical cases any hospital would treat. But we had patients from advance troops who had been in jungle manoeuvres; and some of them had prickly heat rash or were severely covered with poison ivy or oak from crawling on the ground.

From Poona, we were stationed in Barrackpur. At the hospital there, some wards were for British medical patients and surgical cases, and there was a separate set of wards for the Indian troops. I was on the night shift in the medical ward, where most of the patients suffered from enteric fever, malaria, and/or dysentery. Some patients had to have injections every three hours, so it was on this ward that I first learned to administer injections. We didn't have a regular sterilizer, just a small primus stove about the size of a little electric plate. (At night, the wards were lit by oil lamps hanging from the ceiling.) Looking after the native-speaking Indian and Gurkha patients was rather difficult, because the orderly and the patients didn't speak English and we didn't speak Urdu!

When I came on duty one night, the nursing sister told me an Indian patient was critically ill with malaria and was not expected to last the night. All I could do was see that he was kept comfortable. In the early hours of the morning I went to his bedside; and with each hand he placed his thumb on his index finger and then brushed it across each fingertip. At first the Indian orderly and I couldn't understand what this meant. Then it dawned on me: he was a converted Catholic. I grabbed another patient's rosary and placed the cross in his fingers. He kissed it, and then passed away.

We gave him a bed bath and put a clean gown on him, and then waited for the nursing sister to make the rounds of our ward. She sent the orderly off to get two men with a stretcher; then disappeared and returned with a large bronze cross and a Union Jack. She told our orderly to stay in the ward while the two of us accompanied the stretcher bearers to the morgue. It was such a clear night, with a full bright moon and every star glittering, that we didn't really need our flashlights to set off across the field with the body on the canvas stretcher.

Then suddenly, the corpse's muscles contracted and the head and shoulder raised up! The orderly at the back of the stretcher shrieked and let go of the wooden handles; the front orderly turned around, looked and let out a loud scream too. Then they both took off running, and we didn't see them for the rest of the shift! The nursing sister and I finished carrying the poor Indian gentleman to the morgue, placed the stretcher on trestles, and draped the Union Jack over the body.

A few days later, I was posted to Calcutta along with another VAD. We were to be billeted at the YWCA on Charingee Street, and were to report to the Regimental Transport Office (RTO) in the city's best hotel, the Grand Hotel. We were told that we would be assigned to a hospital ship carrying sick and wounded servicemen along the coast of India.

So for six weeks, our only duties were to report to the RTO daily. That was when we really saw India! Shopping on Charingee Street, you would think you were on any main street in Ottawa or Toronto. But turn down a side street, and you would find yourself at a row of native shops. They didn't have glass fronts or doors; at closing time the shopkeepers would just pull the goods back into the shop, and then slide a ceiling-high folding iron gate out across the front of the store. In the main street stores, you paid the price quoted; but at the native stores, customers were expected to haggle. Same thing with the "rickshaw wallahs"and taxi drivers – though you didn't haggle with the drivers when they had a bouncer sitting beside them!

We noticed all kinds of things about the city that were different from the streets back home. For instance, most main streets had quite a step up from the road to the sidewalk, because of the heavy monsoon rains. And instead of stop lights at the intersections, a policeman stood on a high box in the centre to direct traffic. Another thing that amazed us at first, though we soon discovered it was common, was the practice of public washing. Here and there around the city were small water pumps on the sidewalk, right at the curb, and below it was a large drain in the gutter. A man would disrobe except for a loincloth, squat on the drain, crank the pump, soak himself and lather up with soap. Then he'd crank the pump again to rinse off, use a piece of clothing to dry off, dress and be on his way.

(Another thing we found was that there were no public washrooms in the city, which meant that one often had the urge to go to the nearest restaurant for a coffee or whatever!)

We stayed at the YWCA for almost two months; and then the army decided to cancel the idea of the hospital ship. So finally we were posted back to Barrackpur, to the same ward as before. There were still a few patients there who had been critically ill when we left for Calcutta. There were hugs and kisses all around, we were so pleased to see the progress they had made during our absence.

When the Japanese surrendered, I was still stationed at the hospital. I didn't resign immediately though, as I knew we were still needed in Singapore – and in fact, we were posted there within a week. We were taken in army trucks from the docks to a field where there were barracks for civilians and servicemen, all of whom had been prisoners of war.

Our sleeping quarters looked like a long row of garages enclosed by a huge veranda; and as we found, the retreating Japanese had destroyed as much furniture as possible in the short time they'd had – even down to the mess hall cookstove. They'd taken the beds apart and thrown them out in a field. It took us all the first afternoon to get ourselves a bed, find drawers that fitted bedside tables, and a small table to set our oil lamp on.

At suppertime we were all called into the mess hall, where we received our mail. Because I had been on the move so much for the past three months, my mail had been stored until I was given a definite posting. Now, I was handed a hundred and seventeen letters!

We were also told that no one had known we were coming, so there were no food rations for forty-six of us VADs and nursing sisters. But a soldier had driven to a nearby camp to collect some tins of soup. As there was no stove, the soup was poured into an old iron pot, which was placed on an oven rack supported by two small brick walls. A fire was lit under the pot, which now contained a mixture of pea, chicken, rice, mushroom and tomato soups. It tasted dreadful, but we were so hungry we were ready to eat anything.

(The food continued dreadful (and limited) for the next few days. Every evening, though, an army truck from a nearby camp would arrive and take us to them for a hot supper meal. By the end of the week we had visited all the nearby stations; but then we managed to get a stove, and our food rations finally arrived.)

There were three prison camps near our area, a few miles apart on the edge of the jungle. Our first evening in Singapore, an army captain who was a doctor in one of the camps visited us to tell us what to expect when we went on duty next morning. He told us that many of the patients had suffered terrible treatment, including abuse and torture, at the hands of the Japanese. Some men were too sick and weak to eat a regular meal; some would wake from bad dreams screaming; and some were so convinced that they could never lead a normal life again that they wanted only to die.

He also said that patients would never recover in surroundings that held such brutal memories for them. So following his advice, our first order of business when we went on duty the next morning was to move all the patients: our patients would be transported to Camp #2, the ones from Camp #2 would be moved to Camp #3, and our hospital would take Camp #3's patients.

That first day, I was on night shift: if a patient was able to get out of bed, I was to help him outside and into the shade, then remake the beds. But what a mix-up! The incoming patients started arriving two hours earlier than expected, while we were still trying to get our patients ready to leave; so we had to wake the morning shift and they had to come on duty hurriedly, without breakfast. What a mess! The arriving patients had to wait in the heat in ambulances and trucks to be admitted – and many of them were already quite ill with heat rashes and tropical diseases.

Caring for these patients was traumatizing and heartbreaking, but we were only too pleased that we could do something for them. Many a time we came off duty, went straight to bed and cried ourselves to sleep – worn out with the sad sights we had seen, and thinking of the terrible physical and mental conditions these soldiers were enduring. But all through this time, we had to be pleasant and understanding – though we were instructed not to be too sympathetic, cheerful or full of fun. This got easier as the months passed and the patients' conditions improved – to the point where they were ready for some nonsense, and would play silly tricks on the nursing staff!

After seven months at the hospital, our patients were in good enough health to be ready to move on. So in the first week of June 1946, the hospital was closed.

Before we left Singapore, we were ready for some sight-seeing; and one day we went into town and stopped at the famous Raffles Hotel. Lord and Lady Mountbatten (he was viceroy to India at the time, as it was still a British colony) were staying on the top floor. We were taking the elevator up to the fourth floor to have a snack in the restaurant when the Lord and Lady rang for the elevator. Well, we just had to get off and take another lift – the operator had orders to stop at the nearest floor and let everyone off before answering the viceregal cail.

After that, we were shipped back to England, where our St. John headquarters arranged our discharge from the Royal Indian Army. A week later we were on our way home to Canada and our families. When I got back to Toronto, I found it had changed. There were many more people here from every nation of the world; vacant lots were being turned into large buildings; and the city streets grew and started being paved. I went directly back to my pre-war occupation as first aid attendant at the laundry, and I continued being an active member of the St. John Ambulance Brigade.

I feel that women contributed most during the war by relieving the men to serve where they were needed most. I viewed all servicewomen as a great asset to their country – you could rely on them to do a good job. I think that serving gave women a great deal more self-confidence, both in their skills and in meeting new people – and in their awareness of their appearance, of the way they dressed.

But the way other people recognized servicewomen was mixed. Some (such as my late brother) said that, "No lady would don a uniform and serve on a military base." Others could not do enough to congratulate and respect women in uniform.

Regardless of attitude, my wartime travels and experiences made a great difference in my life – it was an experience I am so thankful I had. There were some happy and some sad times, which was to be expected; and I made some wonderful friendships. (I'm still in contact with three former St. John Ambulance members who served overseas.) And practically speaking, my adventures in the jungle taught me to find out the length and duration of a trip before leaving, to ask about what to expect at the journey's end, and to travel light with only the bare necessities.

Lillabelle Roe

When war broke out, I was working as a waitress in a restaurant and living in a rooming house. War production quickly began in full force, and thousands responded to the giant newspaper ads and joined the civil service. The Commonwealth Air Training Plan came to Canada and things were just steamrolling along. Hundreds of servicemen also came to Ottawa; and with all the new departments, the civil service expanded quickly and the city became very crowded. This was great for finding a dance partner! But it was sad too, because we had to say good bye to so many of our men. As soon as a young man graduated, he would go into the services.

I found a job as a civil servant at Naval Service Headquarters, as a Confidential Book Corrector. If one of our ships was sunk, all the books of codes and cyphers had to be changed immediately. Keeping all the books current was a huge undertaking. I eventually worked my way up to assistant supervisor.

But after a while, I wanted to do more. I didn't want to be a civil servant for ever, because I felt there was not enough room for promotion. I wanted to have more scope and learn about the world. So I chose to join the navy. I had several reasons. One was that since it was the last service to accept women, I thought there would be more career opportunities – so many women would already have joined the other services that there would be less competition. Other reasons were that many people I knew had already joined the navy; I didn't particularly like the army uniforms; and my boyfriend, when he went into the air force, had made me promise not to join the WDs. But he never said anything about the navy!

When I first joined up, my father was very hurt – going away from home wasn't common then, and it put a break in the family. But his attitude must have changed: when I came home on leave in July, he wouldn't let me out of my uniform! Perhaps he realized then that I wasn't in any danger? My older sister was annoyed with my decision too – she thought I must have lost my mind. But again, this must have changed at some point: she later joined the navy as well!

I was always adventurous and independent – I think many of the women who joined up were. There was a lot that I wanted to do before settling down, and I was always searching for excitement.

I was able to put my former experience to good use by joining up as a Confidential Book Corrector. I did my basic training in Galt, which is now part of Cambridge. Our building was previously a school for young female offenders. It was all brick, and built on a large acreage on the outskirts of town. We learned all kinds of things, including history and discipline.

(The first women to join the navy, who would become the officers, petty officers and recruiters, were trained in Ottawa at a place called Hollyrod House. About a hundred women were trained there, and they formed the nucleus of the WRCNS. They took over the basic training program at Galt.)

After two weeks at Galt , I was posted to Halifax. I trained other book correctors in the base book office, with fourteen people under me working to change the sets of codes. It was very detailed work; and we were also trained to understand how secret it was, and how dangerous the consequences could be if any of it leaked out. We were all young and just starting out, so this was difficult and stressful work.

After I'd been in Halifax for six months, one of the civilian women working in the Intelligence office (which was under the direction of both Ottawa and the British Admiralty) had a breakdown; and I was sent in as her replacement. I had a staff of five and was (again) in charge of the corrections to books. My duties also included censoring various materials, such as photos. (Not mail, though – there was a separate section for that. The Maritime Surface Warfare office censored everything. It also did security checks on people, and worked with the Ops people to set up convoy routes.)

Since I wasn't an officer, I wasn't privy to a lot. But still, I was the first Wren in the Halifax intelligence office! Of the two and a half years I spent in the service, two were in that office. They wouldn't let me go anywhere else, because they didn't want to lose me!

Another of my duties was to check off the names of casualties against the crew lists of sunken ships. That always upset me.

One event I remember from Halifax: Winston Churchill came to Canada. The ship to take him back to England arrived before he flew in to meet it, and was anchored in the harbour for several days. He travelled out to it by harbour craft. Halifax was and is the biggest natural port in the world, and it always amazed me how they ever managed to get ships out without being observed by the German spies in the area.

It was new to have women in the navy, and that created a new atmosphere. We didn't always feel accepted. The women officers also experienced this, although their experiences were on a different level. They were more sympathetic than the men, and saw us as people. Some were very tough – though for some, I believe that was a façade.

I didn't fit in as fast as some others, because I was very quiet – I always had to be careful of what I said and did, for security reasons. But my experience in the navy made me feel that what I was doing was worthwhile. And I met my best friend in the service; we still talk on the phone today. We're always glad these days to see others from the navy, because we have so much in common. There are very few places where you can form such fast friendships.

I was discharged in October 1945, as a Leading Wren. My discharge was later than many of the others, because I still had to go out onto the ships, count their books and bring them back to the base book office – where I believe they were destroyed.

In the aftermath of the war, men and women service people were treated differently: when we women came out of the service, they didn't give us land grants. But we did get clothing grants, and could sign up for retraining – including university – if we qualified.

Back then, women's careers were restricted – it was less likely that you would be in an interesting position. Personally, I think women should be in Intelligence work. We're sensible, articulate, logical – and in my experience, the women did less bragging and were better able to keep a secret!

Nano Pennefather-McConnell

In 1939, when I was nineteen, another world war was starting. My family lived in Ottawa and had strong military roots: my mother's brother Stuart Hayes was killed in the First World War; my great-uncle Archie Macdonnell had been a general in South Africa's Boer War; and my great-grandmother's brother, Colonel John Macdonnell, had died protecting Canada against invasion by the Americans during the War of 1812. He was buried beside General Brock, and the inscription on his tomb was a Latin quotation from the Roman poet Horace: *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* – "It is sweet and proper to die for one's country."

I had not yet read Wilfred Owen's poem, written after his experience in the First World War in which he called Horace's statement "the old lie." But now another generation was about to examine the traditions about war that had been handed down to us; and my brother, who was twenty, was called up into the Naval Reserve and went away to offer his life for his country as well.

My second brother soon joined the air force to train as a wireless Air Gunner; and in the fall of 1941 the Royal Canadian Air Force began admitting the first women to its ranks. (Nursing Sisters, commissioned as officers, were already part of the Medical Corps of all three forces.) There was much debate about the advisability of this. Many men objected to women entering the ultimate macho arena. Eventually the Canadian government was shamed into taking the step when the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan decided that Canada was a suitable site, and suggested sending members of the British Women's Auxiliary Air Force to help staff the training schools being set up across the country.

At that time, I was working in the Treasury Office of the Department of Public Works, typing file folders and amending spending estimates. By April 1942, I had decided that this job and my volunteer work at the YMCA Servicemen's Canteen and the Canadian Red Cross were not enough for me, so I joined the Women's Division of the RCAF. My mother and brothers supported my following the family tradition – and the fact that I found my office job extremely boring was an added incentive!

I went to Toronto to do my Basic and Trades Training. We learned how to apply our typing and shorthand skills to air force procedures, as well as how to wear a uniform properly, march and obey orders. My first posting was to the No. 1 Bombing and Gunnery School at Jarvis, Ontario. There we replaced men who had been doing clerical work, so that they could train as aircrew. There was never any question of women as aircrew, although some women photographers would occasionally fly to practice their trade. The WD recruiting posters all said: "We Serve That Men Might Fly."

Young men came from all over Canada, as well as from New Zealand, Australia, South Africa and Great Britain, to learn the basics of bombing and gunnery. These trainees made us feel welcome on the station, and in our off-duty time we played tennis, danced, went swimming in nearby Lake Erie, and generally had a lot of good times.

I played tennis with an Australian one evening, and the next evening he came looking for me in the women's barracks for another match. He knocked on the front door and asked for me; and I went to the door, dressed in my long red-plaid flannel housecoat to tell him I'd meet him at the tennis courts. Well! – an international incident almost ensued! The WD corporal in charge of our barracks confronted Clem with a loud command: "Leave the premises immediately, or I'll put you on charge." Neither of us knew that the WD barracks block, inside and outside, was strictly out of bounds to all male personnel.

I would have been quite happy to spend the rest of the summer at Jarvis. However, one day I was called to the Adjutant's office and given two choices: I could either take the Officer's Training Course, or go overseas with the first contingent of WDs. I didn't hesitate for a moment: I had no desire for the responsibility of being an officer; and going overseas was something everyone saw as the thing to do.

My posting to England soon came through, but my excitement was dampened by a sobering duty I had to carry out one evening. After my usual work hours, I was told to report back to the Orderly Room. A Bolingbroke training plane had been practice-bombing a target not far offshore when it suddenly lost altitude and crashed into Lake Erie. There were no survivors. My job was to send telegrams from the Commanding Officer to the next of kin in Saskatchewan, New Zealand, Australia and England, informing them of the tragedy. I knew the English airman slightly – he had given me his wife's address when he heard I was going to England. The next day the men and women of the station all slow-marched in a funeral procession. The reality of war was beginning to sink in.

My two weeks' embarkation leave was spent at home in Ottawa and at our summer cottage in Aylmer, Quebec. My next stop was the air base at Rockcliffe, where I met the other women from stations across Canada who would be my companions for the next three years – and friends for ever. It was the start of a great adventure.

From Rockcliffe we went to Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, where we were given Clearance Sheets to help keep track of all the training and equipment we needed before getting on the troopship. Among other essential parts of our uniform, we were all issued with 15 pairs of gunmetal-grey lisle stockings, steel helmets to protect us from the bombs, and gas masks. The latter had to be tested for proper fit by going through a gas-filled room. (They weren't tested again until nearly the end of the war.) We also had to be checked out by a doctor and a dentist, who decided that my future roommate Clare Rutherford (who was from Hamilton) should have all her wisdom teeth removed before she left. Needless to say, she felt pretty miserable for most of the trip at sea.

None of us had been given any training with guns, but one of the items printed on the Clearance Sheets (used only by male personnel up to then) was "Target Shooting." Dutifully I went to the target area, wondering what was in store. The sergeant in charge handed me a rifle and pointed to a firing lane. I watched some airmen ahead of me stretch out on the floor with the gun, so I did the same. When I was told to shoot, I managed to hit the target – in the next lane! The sergeant nearly had a fit. He grabbed the rifle from me and asked me where I took my training. When I told him I had never had a gun in my hands in my life, he got on the telephone and made sure that none of the other women would be sent to him.

A few days before we left, I decided I needed a perm and went to a hairdresser in Halifax. She told me what day we were going to sail – news that I didn't hear officially until several days later, the morning before we embarked. So much for the need for secrecy that was impressed on all of us! With thousands of troops on board to be provisioned, as well as the other ships in the convoy, the locals had become familiar with the process.

We marched down the streets of Halifax onto our troopship, singing *I've Got Sixpence* and *Wish Me Luck As You Wave Me Goodbye.* We joined a group of French-Canadian nursing sisters from Montreal, and the 4,000 army, navy and air force men who were to be our travelling companions. Our first night on board there was an impromptu dance on the lower deck, with music played on instruments that some of the soldiers had brought with them. We were only a few girls, and the men kept cutting in. One of them was an air force service policeman who whispered in my ear: "Go back to your cabin, that's an order." He kept moving around the dance, and the other women all got the same message. Naive as we were, it never occurred to us that anyone might think that there was a potential for danger on that crowded lower deck. The ship was still in the harbour!

Our trip over was both exciting and scary. One evening the second night out, the alarm bell sounded for us to go to our lifeboat stations – though this was later reversed and we were told to stay in our cabin area. I asked a member of the ship's crew how one told the difference between the sound of depth charges (which we heard quite regularly that evening) and the sound of a submarine torpedo. "You'll know," was his brief reply. We heard many rumours about that night's events; but it was only years later that I heard the real story from my cousin Murray Maynard, who had been travelling on another troopship in the same convoy. One of the destroyers escorting our convoy was manoeuvring to drop depth charges on a German submarine when it accidentally hit an oil tanker – which rammed Murray's troopship, putting a hole in its side. The tanker sank and the troopship had to return to Halifax for repairs.

Imminent danger didn't prevent military concern with being correctly turned out, though: my friend Margaret MacKinnon was told she wasn't properly dressed that night, because in the rush to get up on deck to the lifeboats she forgot to put on her tie pin! From then on, our orders were to sleep in full uniform, including greatcoats and life preservers (Mae Wests, we called them). Some women wore slacks, which we were allowed to do while walking around the deck during the day. I made the mistake of suggesting that slacks might be more appropriate if we had to take to the lifeboats at night. In no uncertain terms I was told that we had to wear our official uniforms, in case we were taken prisoner by the enemy. (Luckily, our indignation at some of these absurd interpretations of "military correctness" helped to distract us momentarily from the very real dangers we faced.)

After our two week "cruise," we were happy to see land and the Scottish port of Greenock – not far from Gourock, the port from which my Macdonnell ancestors had set sail in 1793. We had an enormous meal on board in the luxurious dining room where we women had our meals. After all the stories we had heard about rationing in England, we thought it might be our last good meal. But when we got on shore, we were greeted by a welcoming party of the Women's Voluntary Service – who had prepared a huge three-course meal to welcome us after our long and arduous voyage! Our officers ordered us to eat everything that was put in front of us.

We took an overnight train to London, and after checking in at RCAF Overseas Headquarters we were given leave and told to look for rooms or flats. Up to then, we had taken it for granted that we would be living in barracks. But apparently early in the war a Canadian Air

Force barracks had been hit by a bomb, and several airmen were wounded or killed. So it was decided that Headquarters personnel should be given a Living Out Allowance, and have their living quarters dispersed throughout London. My brother Peter was in town on leave from his Coastal Command station, and he helped me find a bed-sitting room with breakfast near Hampstead Heath. I shared this with Clare. Later on we found a flat in Chelsea and were joined by Margaret MacKinnon (from Moosomin, Saskatchewan); Adele Grant (from Sandford, Manitoba); and Pat Boreham (from Peterborough, Ontario).

One of the first places we visited in London was the Beaver Club, where Canadian service people congregated. As we walked in the door, two Canadian soldiers greeted us with: "Say something to us in Canadian, please!" We rushed to read some Canadian newspapers, as we hadn't heard any news for two weeks. It was September 1942, and the papers were filled with columns of casualties from the Dieppe raid, which had taken place while we were at sea. Some soldiers who had returned safely from the raid spoke bitterly of their experience. I was shocked to hear their reaction. One told us that the whole event was a terrible mistake and a huge error in judgement. Another felt that if they had had some backup after landing, they could have advanced and captured their objective. It was one more awareness for us that there was more to war than giving and carrying out orders.

That same day I ran into my next-door neighbour from Ottawa, Moe Zumarr. We went out to a dance at Covent Garden, and on the way he commented that back home we would not have gone out together. I had to agree, but I had never consciously thought about this reality. I had never let myself examine the prejudices in Canada. At the beginning of the war a number of Jewish orphans, whose parents had been executed in Nazi concentration camps, were sent to Canada to be adopted by Canadian Jewish families who had agreed to take them in. But when the passenger liner *Louis* arrived in Halifax, these children weren't allowed to disembark – the ship was sent back to France.

Later I also met two other neighbours from Marlborough Avenue in Ottawa, Duke Abelson and Moe's brother Rube. All three had come to the legal department at RCAF Overseas HQ; and they had all been advised to change their names and remove the religious designation "HEB" from their identity disks. Intelligence information had revealed that the Nazis were not following the Geneva Convention of sending enemy servicemen captured in combat to special Prisoner of War camps. Instead, it was learned, Jewish personnel taken by the Nazis were sent to the same concentration camps where so-called "political prisoners" were confined. I was shocked to discover that Canadian Jewish service people could be in such double jeopardy. This was not common knowledge, either then or today. (Not long afterward, I got news that both Moe and Duke were reported Missing in Action – Believed Killed.)

At HQ we were assigned to work as clerks and stenographers in the various departments. I worked first in Records Information, where we kept track of where all the Canadians in the Air Force overseas were stationed. Some were attached to Royal Air Force (RAF) squadrons and others to RCAF squadrons. There was a move to transfer as many Canadian personnel as possible to the latter as soon as they were formed, in order to allow Canadian aircrews to be commanded by Canadians.

When I was transferred to the Personnel section, I discovered that Canada had sent over a psychologist to re-examine the files of some Canadian aircrew who had been dishonourably discharged by the RAF for what was called "Lack of Moral Fibre." They had refused to continue flying after being under severe stress during a number of bombing raids. I knew many young men in the aircrews, and they would sometimes confide their fears to me. I admired their courage in continuing to fly in spite of their experiences, but I could quite understand how they would reach the limits of human endurance. (Today, we would call this Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.) After my first shock at the attitude of the RAF towards these men, I was relieved to discover (while typing up the files) that the RCAF was more considerate of its aircrews and obtained the most up-to-date advice on treating them.

Later I was assigned to the Women's Section, where my administrative work expanded to organizing sports and entertainment, finding housing for the new drafts arriving from Canada, and compiling lists of flats and rooming houses to be made available to them. Eventually there were nearly a thousand WDs in England. We met a number of them at sports meets for events such as volleyball and swimming. In London we had a committee called Canadian Servicewomen Overseas, which planned events of mutual interest. We also played softball games with the Canadian Women's Army Corps (CWAC), the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service (WRCNS) and the American Women's Army Corps (WAC).

The women of the Royal Norwegian Air Force who were stationed in London introduced us to a game they called handball, but which we called "mud football." The first game was played with much fanfare, with newsreel cameras and a Canadian Air Marshall (Lloyd S. Breadner) and a Norwegian Admiral (H. Riiser-Larsen) in attendance. (As captain, I had to introduce these luminaries to the team.) We played regular games with the Norwegian women until one Saturday, during the V1 attacks, they didn't turn up for a scheduled game. A bystander told us that their barracks had been hit by one of these guided missiles ("buzz bombs," as we called them), and the team would not be coming. We never played mud football again.

When we first arrived in London there was sporadic bombing, which we learned to take in our stride. Later, when the German V1s and V2s began to fall, it was a lot more terrifying. (The V stood for the German word *Vergeltungswaffen*, or "revenge weapons.) The V1s were pilotless planes which we could see coming, and possibly take cover from, before they crashed with their bomb load. The V2s were rockets that were launched into the stratosphere from France or Holland, aimed at London. They would fall without warning, and could destroy a city block with their bomb load as they exploded. (From June 1944 to March 1945, some 10,500 V1s and 1,115 V2s were launched, resulting in untold property damage and over 33,000 casualties.)

When the attacks were at their peak, in August 1944, orders came to be on 24-hour notice for possible evacuation out of London. At that time, we had decided to have a party with some good friends who worked in the Accounts section at HQ in Knightsbridge, and had a flat near us. (In fact, Clare and Pat eventually married two of these men.) In the middle of our party, while we danced to records sent from home, there was a terrible bang. I ran downstairs so fast I don't remember touching any steps, and some of the boys went outside to see what had happened. It was a V2 that had landed a few blocks away, blowing out most of the windows in the shops on the King's Road near our flat.

By this point our nerves were pretty frazzled, and I welcomed my spells of temporary duty to the hospitals outside London, or trips to ports in Scotland escorting airwomen who were being repatriated. I didn't realize how stressed I was until one day I went to the dentist. As the Novocaine he injected into my gums began to take effect and I began to relax, tears started streaming down my face. I was embarrassed and said, "I don't know why I'm crying, so just go ahead and fill my tooth." The dentist was most understanding and spoke of the stress we were all under – including him. He asked if I'd had any leave lately, and suggested that I take some soon.

Our bombers continued to bomb enemy targets, but we didn't see much of our aircrew friends – they weren't supposed to come to London on leave, as it was considered too dangerous. The Normandy invasion came just in time – the V-missile attacks gradually grew less, as the Allies moved forward in Europe and were able to destroy the launching sites.

Although polls taken in the early years of the war indicated some opposition to women in the armed forces, our reception by servicemen overseas was generally very positive. We replaced men in their work in London and Yorkshire, and also enjoyed their companionship and that of the Canadian aircrews who came to London on leave. Some of them were very protective, and treated us like the girls next door. I remember travelling on a night train after escorting an airwoman to a Scottish port. Seated opposite me was a Canadian military policeman (MP) escorting a prisoner, a young soldier who looked about sixteen. Around two in the morning I woke up and headed to the bathroom. The corridors were packed with servicemen, some leaning against the walls, others asleep on the floor against the washroom door. When I came back, defeated, the MP asked: "Couldn't you get in?" I explained the situation and he came out to the corridor, moved bodies away from the door, and waited outside to take me back to my seat.

An encounter on another train trip was not quite so gallant. I was chatting with an American soldier sitting beside me when the train went through a tunnel, and in the darkness I could feel his arm coming around behind me. I had been enjoying the conversation and didn't want to make a big issue, so I gave him a sharp kick on the ankle and just went on talking. He took the hint!

Some girls became good friends with the servicemen, and others became romantically involved. Many women fell in love and got married. Some fell in love, got pregnant and didn't get married. It's difficult for people today to understand the attitudes that prevailed in the 1940s towards women who became pregnant outside of marriage. Selling (or even advertising) birth control material was illegal in Canada; and abortion was a criminal offence as well as a dangerous procedure.

There was also a sexual double standard: men, particularly servicemen, were expected to be sexually active, but unmarried women were looked down upon for the same behaviour. Servicemen were issued condoms, to prevent venereal disease; but women in the services were shown a film suggesting that we wait until marriage before having sex.

Armed with this kind of education, I was assigned to help unmarried pregnant women work out their situation. At first, as soon as a girl discovered she was pregnant, the official policy was to send her back to Canada to be discharged. One girl purposely missed her troopship's sailing, and was charged with desertion for missing a draft in wartime. (A man would have been court martialled, imprisoned and eventually dishonourably discharged.) But that rule really didn't fit her situation. Instead she was confined to barracks under guard, which meant that two women sergeants had to stay at the flat with her. She would jokingly say: "Well, I guess I'd better keep the door open when I go to the bathroom, so you can keep an eye on me!"

"Jane" thought that the father of the baby intended to marry her; but when he told her he was already married and could take no responsibility, she decided to have her baby adopted. We arranged this through the National Adoption Association in Britain, and she was able to stay at the Canadian Women's Convalescent Hospital in Alderbroke. The Canadian Red Cross sent over layettes, and I had to find a foster home for the baby while we waited for the adoption. But before that happened, "Jane" changed her mind and decided to keep her baby. She changed her name to make it appear that she had married, and took the baby home.

One evening in February 1945, I was waiting for a bus in Farnborough after visiting an airwoman in hospital when I heard the familiar sound of heavily laden Allied bombers. I had never seen so many at one time – they stretched from horizon to horizon as far as the eye could see, like a giant Christmas tree with their red and green wing lights flashing. Some people were cheering, but my heart sank. That many planes couldn't just be bombing military targets; they had to be bombing civilians. In spite of all the dreadful things the enemy had done, I still believed we could stick to the rules of war and not imitate the Nazis by bombing civilians. But no one I knew seemed to think that way, and I couldn't share my thoughts.

My reaction was the same, only stronger, when we dropped the atom bomb on Japan. As I was walking down Southampton Row towards RCAF Overseas HQ, I read the huge headlines: ALLIES DROP ATOM BOMB ON HIROSHIMA. Consternation and betrayal, then anger, welled up inside me. Everything we had fought for was now denied. But my feelings were ambivalent: I was also relieved that the war was over, and that we could all go home and get on with our lives. Since that was the predominant reaction among most of my family and friends, I kept most of my negative thoughts and feelings to myself.

We were well prepared for our discharge to civilian life. On the advice of a career counsellor, I decided to take advantage of the education and re-establishment grants; and back in Canada I returned to university to get a degree in Social Work. I worked for a few years, got married and had a family, and then went back to the field of social work.

When I decided to retire, I was able to apply for War Veterans Allowance. This was one of the few areas where women received preferential treatment: they could receive this allowance at fifty-five, whereas a man had to be sixty. In those days fewer women worked outside the home and it was assumed that a woman would have a more difficult time finding work at that age, and less likely to have built up a workplace pension. (There is also still a Veteran's Independence Program to help overseas veterans obtain services such as home maintenance, groundskeeping and transportation.)

I didn't become a feminist until I reached my sixties. To me that means encouraging women to be proud of being women, to be who they are – not just be there for the men. I have discovered that feminist historians often don't seem to think that the war period, and the start of women's involvement in the military, were very important for the women's liberation movement. But while we did continue to do traditional women's jobs, we did them in non-traditional settings – and that paved the way for women to be admitted into the armed forces, where they are now expected to do most of the jobs that men do. We raised a new generation of strong daughters, who now take many opportunities for granted.

The war helped me to appreciate what women and men are capable of when called on to help defend their country and its values. I honour the memory of the brave young men and women who died doing this. And being in the service gave me confidence, and the ability to speak out – though paradoxically, what I often speak out about is the horror and futility of war. Each generation that goes to war discovers that.

I hope the new War Museum will have a larger area dedicated to women's history. Women war veterans need to tell their own story.

Elizabeth Neve –

née Hunt

When war was declared on September 3, 1939, I was a schoolgirl living in Somerset in West England, near Bath. We were all called to my grandfather's house in Bathampton, where about forty of us – all his children and grandchildren – listened on the radio to prime minister Neville Chamberlain telling us that England had declared war on Germany. Everyone was crying. I remember thinking: now what? At fifteen, you don't really know what this means.

My father had served in the First World War, but my parents never talked about it. My family was not really military, although my brother had gone into the Royal Navy as his career. He was assigned to the new ship *HMS Sheffield*. And my father, who was a businessman, was also in the Territorials (somewhat like the Canadian militia). They would go to serve if they were needed. My mother did a great deal of voluntary work for the families of the men who went to war.

My first exposure to the war was when I was staying with an aunt in Bath, which was an open city – there were no anti-aircraft guns to protect us from the German planes and bombs. I was grocery shopping with her one day when bombs started falling. She dropped what she was carrying and said: "Come on, Libby, we have to get to the car!" I said no, we couldn't leave all the food she had dropped on the ground. This was a time when rationing was very strict and protein was scarce – I wasn't about to leave that fish in the gutter!

I went to a very good convent school, in an old house in Kent. I had my own pony there and was head of all the games: we played grass hockey, basketball, cricket and tennis. But in 1940, a big influx of Canadian soldiers arrived one day and bivouacked in the forest around our school. Of course, we did no more class work that day: we were just bug-eyed over these handsome men!

The Canadians took over our hockey pitch and turned it into a baseball diamond. They also took over our swimming pool, and the nuns didn't want us to swim there any more! However, we were allowed to mix with the soldiers – though girls under fifteen had to have a nun with them. (Anybody over fifteen was allowed to go unchaperoned, which I found rather bizarre.) I was sixteen by then.

The men were all French Canadians, from Quebec, and the French they spoke was similar to that of a handful of nuns who spoke Flemish – it was the same kind of patois. We would see these nuns and soldiers walking around the gardens in the evening, talking French together.

Then our world was shattered: somehow the Germans found out that these Canadians were bivouacked at the school. One evening around five o'clock, as we were having tea, a lone German dive-bomber swooped down and bombed and machine-gunned the school. There were bullet holes in our dormitories, in our desks, in the gym, in our chapel and in the garden – and one nun was killed.

Fortunately, we were in a part of the house that they didn't strafe – and none of the soldiers were anywhere near the places that were hit. The Germans obviously thought the Canadians had their headquarters in our house, but they were safe in their tents in the forest. Of course we girls had to speculate who might have told the Germans. We didn't know who it really was, of course, but we had to have a scapegoat; so we decided that the Belgian priest was a spy. We hated this man. You see, he was what today we'd call a predator. He preyed on young girls. But that's another story....

When I left school, I was hoping to become an actress. But I received a letter from the Ministry of War telling me that I had been drafted, and that I had to go and serve. My parents were on holiday when the letter arrived; but luckily my elder sister (who was in medical school) was home from the hospital. "Well, what are you going to do?" she asked me. I said I thought I'd like to be in the Royal Air Force – my father was in the army and my brother in the navy, but we had nobody in the air force. So off I went and signed up.

The armed forces had some good recruiting posters. One had a picture of a man in uniform saying: "We want you!" The "you" could have been anyone, of course; but all the men were gone by now, so the "you" they wanted had to be women. I had heard the Ministry of War on the radio, asking for drivers in the air force. I knew this was something I could do, because I had learned how to drive – and I had driven around in an ambulance with my aunt, to see what she was doing. So that's what I decided to do.

However, when I went for my interview, the recruiting officer said: "You have your senior matriculation, you were obviously going to go to university – so why don't you become an officer? We need some meteorologists."

Under my breath, I said: "In your dreams!" I was eighteen, and I didn't want to be an officer: I wanted to be a driver and have fun. It was a wonderful job. If you were a driver, you got to be off base every day doing errands and driving people around – unlike the other trades, who were stuck on the base and never got off except on leave. You never had to parade, attend church services, do Phys-Ed or line up for visiting dignitaries. And we had much nicer uniforms: trousers and leather sleeveless vests with fur inside that came down to our knees, because we had to go out at night when it was cold. I enjoyed my profession as a driver, and was never disillusioned with the job.

But first we had basic training for five weeks. A great number of men and women together learned how to march, and learned King's Regulations and Air Force Instructions. We were also issued complete air force clothing – everything, including bras, panties and garter belts. My mother said it was as though I was dead: my suitcase came back to her with all my civilian clothing in it!

My family was not happy with my choice; in fact, my parents were quite upset that I had signed up while they were away. My father said he would have thought up something to get me deferred. But I was patriotic and I wanted to serve my country – and have some fun. I had seen the horrific bombings at my school and in Bath; and I had also seen my father's office in Bristol, bombed to smithereens one night. I had witnessed all that, and I still felt that we all had to do our bit.

Then I was sent on a three-month driving course – it didn't matter whether you already knew how to drive. A civilian man taught us how to drive English cars; then we learned to drive American cars. Later we went on to heavy-duty trucks. Air force instructors taught us how to drive a vehicle called a "Queen Mary" – she was like a tractor-trailer, and very buxom! They would put a tank on the back so that it was a double rig; and lay down oil to teach us how to negotiate slippery roads. It was very difficult, but we managed.

When we were tested, I finished first on the written exam and second in the driving; so they said I should become a driving instructor. Once again I thought: "In your dreams!" I wanted to get on to a fighter station, not piddle around teaching others how to drive. (But oddly enough, when I finally did get my posting, I was always the one sent out to see whether the new drivers were any good. Sometimes we'd get drivers who weren't that wonderful, and they had to be put on easy stuff – such as driving staff cars!)

I was posted to the Transport Section at RAF Colerne in Somerset, a Fighter Command station. There were very few male drivers there, because they were all overseas or wherever; so we women had to drive all kinds of things. One of them was called a "thousand-gallon bowser" – it actually carried 5,000 gallons of plane fuel. I had to climb up on top of the airplane wing and fill it up from the truck.

I'll never forget the first time I was sent out with the ambulance to pick up some men who had been killed. The pilots would go out in their Mosquitoes in pairs, very early in the morning, to practice what was called "feathering their props": they would go up, switch off one engine, and try to turn around and land with only the other one. Well, that particular morning it was disastrous. Two planes crashed: one guy lost control of his plane and nose-dived right into the hangar where several planes were being serviced. The whole place blew up, and everybody inside was killed.

I was watching all this from the control tower, where I was driving one of the officers; and I was sent out to check what had happened to the second Mosquito. It had crashed in a field and broken completely in two. I went to pick up a pair of boots from it – and the pilot's legs were still in them. The rest of him was still in the downed plane. They sent some men to pick up the body, but I had to pick up the boots and put them in the truck. This was a very emotional time, because I knew these men. When they weren't flying, they waited in what was called a dispersal hut; and we got to know them quite well. We talked and played cards. So it was like losing family.

I drove all kinds of vehicles. Once a whole squadron of twenty-six American aircraft – Flying Fortresses – landed at Colerne, and I had to go out in this little van with a light on top and a sign that said "Follow Me." I drove up to meet each plane as it landed, and showed the pilot where to park – I would then light up the sign to read "Stop." I did that 26 times – it was dark by the time I'd finished helping all the aircraft park.

I was assigned as driver for the Commander of the American squadron. He was very nice and told me all about the United States, about which I knew nothing. It was very interesting. When he left he gave me all kinds of goodies, such as lipsticks, cigarettes, gum and silk stockings. He invited me out, but I didn't go. I was very choosy at the time.

When we were off duty in the evening, we had dances at the base. There were a number of musicians among the men and women at the station, and we had the most wonderful jazz band playing "big band" music. Between that and the movie houses and coffee shops on the base, we had a great deal of fun.

I also got to meet the Queen Mother at the time, old Queen Mary, twice – both times under thoroughly embarrassing circumstances. Once I was driving the big laundry truck back to the airfield. We were driving up a very narrow street in the city of Bath in the rain; and somehow all the clean laundry managed to fall out right in front of the royal car. I was chagrined; but not nearly as much as I was the second time I met her, when I was half naked!

Queen Mary was being shown around the Colerne base, including our sleeping quarters – it was quite an informal visit, we hadn't been given any notice. As it happened, I was the only one there: drivers kept irregular hours, and I'd been having a shower. So as she and her entourage of high-ranking women officers came in, I was sitting on my bed in my bra and panties, setting my wet hair! I scrambled into my shirt, embarrassed, but of course I didn't have a free hand to do it up with. But she was very nice; she was intrigued by the bobby pins I was using. I gave her a few, and remarked that what we really needed in the dormitory was a mirror. The next day, a huge gilt mirror arrived for us. She remembered!

I was a Leading Air Woman by then, with propellers on my sleeves, but still a very lowly toad. My work was never boring, always interesting – I was on fourteen different airfields in the course of my service! When I would go to a new camp, I'd report to the Transport Section to be assigned to a vehicle. In one camp – RAF Hunsdon, in Hertfordshire, just north of London – I drove an ambulance for

36-hour stretches just after D-Day. I would go on duty at 8 a.m. in the ambulance with a medical officer. We would sit at the end of the runway, and pick up the casualties if there were any crashes. The next day, in another ambulance, I would go and pick up people who had appendicitis, or something not related to the war.

One day I was called to one of the Nissen huts the men were billeted in, forty to a hut. I asked the men what was going on, and they said there was a bloke in the shower. So I went into the bathroom – and there was this guy who had hanged himself. I had no medical training, but I said to my orderly: "Come on, let's cut him down, he might still be alive!" Well, the orderly just fainted. So I called out to the guys, and one man who was half-dressed came in and helped me cut him down. We put him on a stretcher and I took him down to the morgue – sadly, he was already dead.

It seemed that every day something sad happened. One of the tasks we had, when a pilot or navigator was shot down, was to take one of his buddies to pack up his clothes and things to send them back to his family. I remember one man doing that and saying: "Well, I suppose I'll be next." And guess what, he was.

There were good times and there were hard times during the war. I was engaged for about three months to a young Canadian named Gerry Piers, who was a journalist from Winnipeg, Manitoba. One of his pilot friends was the young Lord Tony Stanley, who was related to the family of Stanley Cup fame. But tragically, Tony, Gerry and their navigators were all killed on their way back from a sortie over Germany. They were doing "victory rolls" over the English Channel when their planes collided and they went into the sea, never to be seen again. It took me a long time to get over that.

(Years later, at another station, I was asked to go to the officers' mess to meet the navigator who had gone through Gerry Piers' personal effects and papers after his death. He said Gerry's diaries were full of me! As a journalist, I suppose he was a good writer. I've sometimes wondered if those journals are now with the Piers family in Winnipeg. But I never followed that up, as I thought it would open up old wounds.)

And eventually, I married into another family. This is a happy story, and it happened at a happy time: it was in early 1946 and the war had been over for nearly a year. I met my husband-to-be at the hospital, where he was a medical officer. I had had a hot perm with my haircut, and had managed to get a burn on the back of my neck. I was in some pain, so I thought I'd better see the MO – and there he was. I thought: "This is a nice man! I wonder if he'll ask me out?" (I learned later that all the other chaps had told him: "Don't even think of asking Libby out. We've all asked her, and she won't go.")

Well, Richard Neve did ask me out, and I did go. The first time we went out was to a play in Bristol, and a number of little things made me feel that we were kindred spirits. For one thing, he too loved horses, and we went riding together. He didn't try to get into my knickers either! That was the beginning of the romance.

We were married six months later, on December 14, 1946. My new husband already had his embarkation papers to go and serve in India, but his leave was extended so that we had about six weeks of honeymoon. After he left for India, I realized I was pregnant. There was no getting out of the air force just because you were married, but being pregnant allowed me to jump the demobilization gun in 1947. (You didn't go home just because the war was over. They couldn't demobilize thousands and thousands of men and women all at once, so they did it in rotation.)

The first thing I did after my release was to throw my uniform into the pigpen! I'm sure that was against King's Regulations – but after having worn the uniform for five years and not having any civilian clothes, I thought: "I'm not even going to keep this thing around."

Richard came back to England from India in 1948 – our daughter was nearly a year old before he ever saw her! Then he did seven years of training as a general surgeon and urologist – and I had babies, three of them. He had relatives who had settled in Canada back in 1837. He said: "You know, it would be fun to go to another country." So that's what we did. We've lived in British Columbia ever since.

I'd tell any young woman considering life in the military today that it could be a very rewarding life – but it involves a lot of discipline. I was used to the convent, where discipline was very harsh, so I was able to take the discipline of the air force. I don't know how some of the women who came straight from home did it: doing what you were told at the double and never answering back, all that kind of stuff. And womens' roles in the air force were really restricted. They wouldn't train women to fly; and even the women who already knew how – who had learned in civilian life – were limited to ferrying new planes, flying the great big Lancasters and other bombers across the Atlantic. They certainly weren't allowed to fly combat missions. But today, women in the military are allowed to do just about anything they want – except serve on submarines.

In my day, I think women in the armed forces were respected. One camp I was in had 14,000 airmen and only 2,000 women, but we were never harassed (except for some catcalls in the mess tent!). Of course, there were all kinds of men and women from different backgrounds, so their cultures were not necessarily the same. I came from an upper-class family, so the men kept their distance and were always very friendly and respectful. When a man asked me out, the first thing I said was "No bed!" And I meant it. So the relationship started off with no expectations, and I had some very good times.

I think the "sexual revolution" of the 1960s, although it opened many doors for women, did them no favours in terms of how men viewed them professionally. I think women have to lay down the ground rules for themselves when they join the armed forces. A good profession is there for the taking. But that's what it is – a profession – and they should *never* let the men think they're there for their convenience. A couple of times, I had to have words with quite senior officers I was driving when they made what you would call propositions. But although young and very junior, I would say: "You forget yourself – behave!" or "Sir! This conversation ends here!"

As for our work, we had to be very matter-of-fact, otherwise we couldn't have done it. Five years is a long time for a young girl just out of school to serve in the armed forces during a war. I saw too much death, and was left with a profound feeling of futility – and misery for the families who lost sons and daughters. A driver friend of mine died when the ammunition in her truck blew up. Another friend, and several other young women, were killed when a Lancaster bomber crash-landed on their sleeping quarters one night.

But I guess we all have inner strengths – and when you think of it, our experiences were nothing compared to the thousands and thousands of civilians on the Continent who were in the concentration camps. We didn't find out about the full horror of those places until after the war; but when I was in the air force, the cinema newsreels showed the concentrations camps at Buchenwald, Birkenau and Auschwitz. We were just horrified.

Young people today see war played out in their living rooms on the all-pervasive television – I wonder if it's at all real to them? When I see such scenes of war on TV, I still find it's very immediate to me. And war still seems to be everywhere, we haven't learned anything.

There is so much young girls can do to serve in the armed forces and contribute to our country. I would like to see all young people who are fit enough do two years of military service after they leave school. The camaraderie, discipline and sense of self-worth they learn would help them for the rest of their lives.

Mabel Patterson, British Empire Medal

Before the war, I was living with my parents in Utterson, Ontario. I worked as a driver for a Chrysler dealer, jockeying cars from the factory in Windsor to the dealership back in town – that was before they started transporting cars by truck. In September I was travelling to pick up a car when I heard the news on the radio that war had been declared. I decided that this would be my chance to serve my country. I had no family in the military, but my family supported my decision to serve. They didn't influence my decision, and neither did my friends. It was entirely my own desire, and a decision I never regretted for a second. I liked every moment of being in the military.

Being single, I had no trouble joining the Canadian Women's Army Corps. (It was more difficult for married women to enter the Forces.) I had tried to join the air force, but I received my call from CWAC first – only a month after its inception. I had my medical the same day, then took the train to Toronto. When I arrived there, I officially enlisted in the Second World War on October 21, 1941, at the Motor Transport Garage on Richmond Street.

I had decided to choose the trade of mechanic, since I already had some experience in the field: I had worked with my father for several years at his garage in Utterson. The Army sent me to the University and Fort York Armouries for basic training, and then to the General Motors plant in Oshawa for a basic mechanics course. (This was considered quite unusual training for women in 1941.) I was attached to the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps (RCASC) in December 1942, then posted back to the Richmond Street Garage as a motor mechanic and placed in charge of the CWACs. The men were being sent overseas into the conflict from this station; and as they left, we women filled in. We replaced literally every man as he departed – I was a sergeant by then, so I replaced the Sergeant Major.

Since we worked such unusual hours, we weren't housed in the barracks: I lived at the YWCA on Elm Street for four years. I had roommates and unfortunately we were not allowed to decorate our rooms – though we could have guests in to visit. Eventually I was relocated to the Oakville Health Centre as barracks. (Later, when it came time to disband, I was put in charge of discharging all ranks, from privates to senior officers.)

I had taught myself to drive before the war, and took my military driving training at the University Armouries and Fort York Armoury in Ste-Anne-de-Bellevue, a suburb of Montreal. We drivers had the excitement of driving various celebrities from Hollywood who came up as part of the effort to raise money for the Victory Loans Program. The first celebrity was Gracie Fields – one of my fellow CWACs drove her to the Maple Leaf Gardens in February 1942.

(The Victory Loans Program was given active support under Commander Margaret Eaton, who was a member of the executive committee. It was Mrs. M. Evis, of CWAC's "B" Company, who bought the first Victory Bond, from H. P. Lewis of the Toronto Committee.)

Back at Richmond, I taught driving and was the driving tester. I was also the first CWAC to command one of the many convoys to Camp Borden. One in particular that stands out in my mind was driving

Winston Churchill and his daughter around Niagara Falls in August 1943. I met the Prime Minister at his train after he had toured the Falls. My other guest in the car that day was Captain Horton, the royal photographer – the King and Queen had loaned him to Churchill for the trip.

When the war ended, I knew about it a day early – it was Top Secret. I was sitting right at Richmond Street in Toronto, placed to be immediately ready for all the service members to flock in from the outlying areas where they were posted. It was anticipated that once the news broke of the war ending, it would be difficult to get all these people safely into the garage. When the news did spread, cars were overturned on Yonge Street! We gave the service members directions to come in the back way, so we could get them and their vehicles inside the station safely.

On June 12, 1944, I was one of thirty-six Canadians who received the British Empire Medal (BEM), as part of the King's Birthday Honour List. I was chosen for this honour "for outstanding service during the three years as a non-commissioned officer, in charge of the CWAC drivers attached to this MT Garage." RCASC Colonel M.C. Eaton put it nicely in her congratulatory letter to me: she said the medal was for "carrying out your duties in an outstanding manner, displaying energy, initiative and devotion to duty of a high order." A year later, on June 12 1945, Lieutenant Governor Matthews presented the medal to me at his rooms in the Parliament Buildings. I learned later that I was only the third CWAC member to qualify for this honour.

I really enjoyed my five years in the army. It was a wonderful place to discover new talents within yourself, and we were all very proud to serve. When the CWACs were demobilized in June 1946, I returned home and took over my parent's business until I retired to Bracebridge, Ontario.

Lillian Baggett –
née Stairs

When the war started, I had just had my fourteenth birthday and was still in school. I lived with my parents on a farm in St. Catharines, Ontario, and life was quiet. Our summers were spent picking fruit, usually cherries, and going for walks and bike rides. Occasionally we would travel into Port Dalhousie.

There was often news on the radio about the possibility of war, but at that age it seemed far away for me. My parents, however, were quite nervous. Both were born in Yorkshire, England, and both still had family there, including my two stepbrothers. My parents listened to every available newscast. When the war began, it didn't quite seem real until our mail from overseas was censored. We started knitting socks for men in the services; food and gas rationing took effect.

In 1941, by the age of sixteen, I had left school and worked at several jobs – one at St. Catharines Steel, manufacturing shells at the war plant. I also worked at Bell Telephone and eventually at the hospital, where I ran the switchboard. An older friend talked about joining the RCAF, which piqued my interest in enlisting. I found out information about the RCAF and the WRCNS, but I still had two years to wait. My parents saw the pamphlets arriving, and knew I wanted to enlist. They were proud to see me assisting the war effort.

My father had served in the First World War, building pontoon bridges and looking after horses. He didn't talk about the war very much. His three brothers had also served in World War One, as did two Canadian cousins and three British cousins – two of whom were female, one in the army and the other in the air force. I think many people were quite surprised when I joined up, since I was very quiet and shy. They didn't think I would ever want to go away from home and do that kind of thing.

Finally, I was eighteen. But when I first tried to join the RCAF WD in Toronto, the woman giving the medical wouldn't believe that I was 18. I barely met the minimum height and weight requirements. She told me to take vitamins, and come back in a month to see if I had put any weight on. I hadn't; but they decided to take me anyway, and my health was fine.

In November 1943, I was sworn to duty as "AW2 Stairs, L." and left immediately for Rockcliffe, where a counsellor suggested that I become a Hospital Assistant. I was extremely pleased, as I had always wanted to be a nurse. Basic training was quite a change: eating in the mess hall, route marches and drills, more medicals and inoculations, then getting our uniforms. We divided our Hospital Assistant training between Trenton, Ontario, and Lachine, Quebec, learning medical terminology and how to do basic tasks such as making beds, giving baths, taking temperatures and filling in patient charts.

We learned about the instrument trays required for various operations, and how to treat injuries such as broken limbs, burns, and poisoning from gas and chemical warfare. We studied everything from the procedures for dealing with plane crashes, to how to make a linseed poultice or a mustard compress to loosen phlegm in the chest. Since many patients had syphilis, we also learned about the various types of what are now called STDs[1].

At the end of training, ten of us were posted back to Lachine. The hospital there was large and fully equipped, so we were overwhelmed with patients from Britain, Australia and New Zealand, stationed nearby with the British Common Air Training Plan. My work varied between the Medical Ward, the Psychiatric Ward, the Ear, Nose and Throat Ward and the Operating Room. (I remember that the first operation I watched was a hemorrhoidectomy. The doctor told me that if I was going to pass out I should leave the room, as they didn't have time to look after me.)

The staff at Lachine was so big that although you would eventually get to know everyone, you would not become close. We lived in barracks, but us hospital assistants had a room to ourselves, since we were on night duty much of the time and needed quiet to sleep during the day. There were about forty of us girls, and only ten showers. You would think we'd have been embarrassed, showering with different girls, but we became used to it.

Our patients ranged from people with bad colds (you couldn't just go to bed), to people needing tonsillectomies and appendectomies. My duties included taking temperatures and pulses, feeding patients and giving them bed baths. We didn't completely bathe the male patients – only so far, and then they would either take care of themselves or a male orderly would take over. Orderlies usually did the urinals, bedpans and things like that for the men; but in the women's section, we bathed the women and did the bedpans.

In Ear, Nose and Throat it was just general hospital duties. The psychiatric ward wasn't that scary, they really weren't bad. We would give them their trays, but there really wasn't much to do. In the operating room I washed instruments, did sterilizing, made swabs and watched operations. I wasn't there very often, since I really didn't like it that much – though I would still have had to take my turn in there, if they'd wanted me.

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1 Sexually transmitted diseases.

The main difference between civilian and military hospitals was that we needed to remember to call the officers Sir or Ma'am – though since we didn't wear our hats inside the hospital, we didn't need to salute. Officers were usually given special treatment; the hospital had three semi-private rooms for them to use. The only civilians I recall working with us were the people employed in the kitchen.

I kept souvenirs of some of my patients: photographs, postcards and some occupational therapy items such as cartoons, a painting and an etching. To this day, several patients stand out in my memory. One was an Irishman named Paddy who always demanded a cup of tea. For some reason we were allowed to break the rules and go to the kitchen and get him tea. In the afternoons we would look at our watches and exclaim, "It's time for Paddy's tea," and off we'd go.

Once there was a plane crash, and two victims were brought in. One of them I knew: we had worked at the same war factory. I was quite surprised to see him in a hospital bed. Luckily, he wasn't seriously injured. But the other one was badly burned; I remember them having to change dressings on him. Then there was an amnesia victim. We were looking for clues that would help us identify him, so at night a nurse would sit with him in case he talked in his sleep.

One of my most vivid memories was when the prisoners of war began to return in February 1945. All the officers were moved out of the Officers' Ward, where I was working at the time, and everything was prepared for the new arrivals. The POWs arrived looking very thin and malnourished, and we wanted to get them healthy. If they wanted anything to eat, we would get it for them. Some of them required special protein drinks to build them up. Most were only there for a few days, just long enough for a medical, before they were moved closer to their home towns.

We didn't really get to know most of the POWs. Some were very quiet, but others seemed to want to talk to someone. Corporal Hill and I were the only two girls on day duty, though, and we didn't have that much time to spend with each one individually – except when they received their back rubs. Those who were able to come down to the dining room talked about their experiences. The stories they told us of what they were forced to endure in the prison camps were terrible: physical and mental torture, being forced to drink urine and eat bugs. Movies can't capture the horrors these men had to face. In fact, one of the POWs had to be transferred to the Psychiatric Ward, and was with us for some time. (He was quite large and had a temper, and would go off if you startled him. I was nervous of him, and always made sure to have other patients around before I woke him.)

The male patients often teased us young hospital assistants and tried to embarrass us, but after a while we became used to their comments. Most of the nursing sisters were nice, but NS Bergeron didn't approve of me. Fortunately, she was in the OR most of the time; but once I had to sit through the night with a patient who had just had a serious operation. He asked if he could hold my hand when the pain got very bad – and when NS Bergeron saw that, she ordered me out of the room.

Another time, a RAF officer who had had his tonsils out helped me to make his bed – which, as an officer, he wasn't really supposed to do. NS Bergeron gave me a lecture about this; but the officer just told her that he outranked her, and would help me if he wanted to.

When the war ended, there was no big celebration on the station. But the Red Cross came a few days later and gave us each a cigarette. (I saved mine in my scrapbook, and have it still.) There was a thanksgiving service for the patients and staff at the station, held in the hospital dining room. The hospital started to close the wards one by one. When the Ear, Nose and Throat Ward was due to be closed, I was working in it. Strangely enough, I needed to have my tonsils out just then, so I became a patient myself – the last tonsillectomy at Lachine, in fact.

In December I was posted to Clinton – quite a change after being at Lachine for so long. But this proved to be my happiest time in the service, and I have fond memories of it. Clinton was a Permanent

Force radar station, much smaller than Lachine, and it wasn't long before I seemed to know everybody on the station. The hospital was small as well and we were like a happy family. Dr. Franklin Shapiro, the only doctor there, was more like one of us than an officer – he was a friend. All the staff used to gather in the dining room for morning coffee.

In January 1946 the staff began receiving their discharges; and soon Clinton was left with only me, an orderly and another assistant. As a result, I had much more responsibility, which I enjoyed. Soon there were so few patients that the hospital assistants moved into the hospital. In the evenings I would invite my friends over. Sometimes Dr. Shapiro and some of the patients would join us. Dr. Shapiro was very helpful to me: knowing that I wanted to be a nurse, he showed me how to do lab tests, take blood and give needles.

At one point, I was working in the medical inspection room. When people went on sick parade they would see the doctor, who would then send them to me to give them whatever medication they needed. There wasn't always a nursing sister there, so I had to give needles and take on more responsibility. At times, I was the only one on duty and would have to deal with whatever came up. For instance, one man would have asthma attacks if he ate certain meals, and I would have to give him adrenaline. I suspected he was allergic to dairy products, and took him off them. After that he was all right.

At that time the military wasn't a career for most girls; and we knew that once the war was over we would go back to civilian life. It wasn't difficult for me to adjust – I was never stationed far from home, and had been able to return often. My plan was to take a nursing course and become a Registered Nurse: our experiences as Hospital Assistants would supposedly help us qualify as RNs, even without a high school education.

By the time I applied, though, they had changed their minds and decided we could only be General Duty Nurses – restricted to making beds, taking temperatures and giving baths. Although I had already partly trained as a RN, thanks in part to Dr. Shapiro, I gave up on my hopes of being a nurse. That's a decision I regret to this day.

But what I learned most from my air force experience was getting along with people. Regardless of nationality or circumstances, you always worked together. You wouldn't hear people complain about what they had to do, or the hours they worked. I think most of us enjoyed our service. I know I did – I enjoyed the work so much that it really didn't seem like work.

The war made me grow up. It was the first time I'd been away from home, living on my own and semi-independent. In the service, they tell you what to do and when to do it – when to get up, what to eat, when to switch from summer to winter uniform. You can't just say, "Well, I don't feel like wearing a greatcoat today."

After the war, I certainly wasn't as shy! I learned to be more independent and very disciplined. If I'm going to do something, I want to do it properly – I would rather do one thing right than half a dozen things haphazardly. In the hospital, everything had to be done "right," and you always had to be ready for inspection. I'm still very fussy about bed-making and tidiness – living in a confined space meant you couldn't leave your clothes lying around, you had to pick them up and put them away.

I feel that women made a huge contribution to the war, working in war plants and doing many of the thing men did. The WD's motto was, "We serve so that men may fly." But I don't think many people realize what a big part women had in the war: my granddaughter was surprized to find out that I had been in the air force. I have many happy memories of my time in the service and the friends that I made. The military was an important part of my life, and I still feel that military life is a great life. I am glad that I had the experience, and I treasure memories of the happy times.

Lorna Cooney –

née Stanger

When the news reached us that war had broken out, I was at my sister's cottage on Meech Lake, north of Ottawa. I thought the world was going to end right then!

At that time, the public service had just started to hire women, and thousands of people were moving to Ottawa to find jobs. Since I was having difficulty finding work, I decided to write the entrance exam. I was accepted, and given a position with Statistics Canada. I spent my time counting up acres of land on an adding machine and recording them in a big book. Five acres, fifty acres... turning the huge pages, I thought: "I can't do this for the rest of my life, I'll go nuts!"

So I said to my girlfriend, "Let's go down and join the services!" But she wouldn't agree to come with me, so I took the afternoon off and went down by myself to enlist. I applied to the army, the navy and the air force. The navy was the first to call me, so that's where I went.

From Ottawa I went to Galt, Ontario, for basic training. With its constant parading, this was quite different from civilian life. However, we were all in the same position – it was new to everyone. We girls had to take turns washing dishes and cleaning bathrooms. I could take pretty much whatever was handed out to me, so I didn't have too many problems – except for my long hair. I kept it up in a pageboy, but I was still constantly being told: "Stanger, get your hair up off your collar!" Finally, I cut it off. My father didn't talk to me for two weeks.

After basic training, our group of friends was split up and sent to different places, so we hardly saw each other again. That was sad. I was posted back to Ottawa, and learned that they wanted to put me in the kitchen. I went to Lieutenant Alvey, who was in charge of the Ottawa wrens, and explained that I had no interest in becoming a cook. She was just wonderful and managed to get me into a photography course offered through DND.

I enjoyed many things about my photography studies: getting outside and seeing things, and keeping busy taking pictures of parades rather than having to be in them! I even liked the developing process. In those days we made our own developing fluids, mixing chemicals and water in great big containers. I enjoyed watching the film turn into pictures as the developing fluid brought out the image. At the right time, when all the detail was in order, we'd give the print ten minutes or so in the stop bath to preserve it and then put it through the dryers. We only had black-and-whites at that time, but there were coloured prints by the end of the war.

After graduating as a photographer, I worked in Naval Information – first in Ottawa, then in Halifax, then back to Ottawa (and finally to London, England, where I stayed till the war was over). In Ottawa, when I first graduated, there were military people just coming out your ears – Elgin Street was alive with them. Navy Headquarters seemed to have more personnel than the other two services together.

One incident from that time left a mark on me – literally. I was working in the darkroom, cutting negative sheets on the paper cutter. I was holding the paper while cutting an 8x10 into a 5x7, when the cutter came down across my finger! I still have the scar.

I was posted out to Halifax, but wasn't there for long. I found out that I was about to be posted to Dartmouth, across the harbour, and I really didn't want to go there. So I went to see Lieutenant Alvey, who had also been posted to Halifax, and told her that I had enough civilian clothes to just go AWOL. "Oh, don't ever do that!" she said; and I was transferred back to Ottawa instead.

Mostly, I enjoyed my work – even though part of it included producing death notices for people killed in action. If a ship was sunk, we used the photos taken when people first enlisted in the navy to produce 5x7s of the crew, which were then sent out to the newspapers across Canada.

While I was in Ottawa, one situation like that happened when the HMCS *Athabascan* was sunk. Because the Germans were quick to triumphantly announce its sinking, news of the tragedy was published right away and the public was aware of it. So we had to hurry to get the crew's pictures out to their home newspapers – families were waiting anxiously to know whether their loved ones were still alive. We all set to work, and continued for thirty-six hours straight until the task was completed.

Then I got the news that I was posted to London. Every wren wanted to be posted overseas, but you had to be twenty-one to be eligible. When my mother found out I was going overseas, she thought I was a goner; but I was very happy to board the *Aquitania*.

We landed in Glasgow, and then stayed for two weeks at HMCS *Niobe*, near London. We were pretty clueless, and rather in awe of the differences between Britain and home. No one had told us Canadian wrens anything, and we couldn't even tell the difference between our planes and the enemies'!

We lived in Nissen huts, which were heated by stoves the size of pots. The stoves were supposed to be fired with peat, which we didn't even know how to do! It was so cold that we burned every bit of paper we could find trying to get this stove going. We kept our greatcoats and everything on, trying to keep warm. We never did figure that stove out – it's a good thing we were able to laugh about it!

Finally, we were transferred to London. There weren't many of us Canadians, so we didn't have our own barracks; we lived with the English wrens on Linster Terrace. We had bunk beds and heavy blackout curtains pulled down over the windows. We Canadians learned to be careful about the goodies we got in our care packages. We used to be sent the new nylon stockings that were just coming in. If we washed these in the laundry area and left them there, they would just disappear – so we had to hang them out to dry on strings between our beds!

Other than that, we got along well with the English wrens. Many of us shared our care parcels with our co-workers and sometimes with the English sailors as well. The English people were very hard up for many things at that time. For instance, we were only allowed three inches of water a day to bathe in. (They didn't give you a time limit for being in the tub but there were lots of girls waiting, so the pressure was on.) Me and two chums (Dorothy Sheridan from Winnipeg and Gail Thaxter from near Toronto) would run nine inches of water, and then each take a bath quickly, one after the other! That was the only way we could get a decent-sized bath. People would rap on the door and yell at us to hurry up, and we would reply, "There's three of us in here!"

Sadly, I didn't do much outdoor photography overseas – most of my work was developing the pictures the sailors had taken, working in the dark rooms doing the developing and printing. We also took whatever pictures the Naval Information department wanted. Back then, the technology was quite different. We used speed graphics with the cameras to take 5x3 photos. I used a Roloflex, which took smaller ones.

I only went out on one or two assignments in England – one was to take pictures of the Canadians celebrating Canada Day, and the other was to photograph the Queen going to open Westminster Abbey. But I took a number of pictures on my own account. As a photographer, I was given a pass that allowed me to take pictures of war-torn places; and when I went out on weekends I would sometimes take pictures of places that had been bombed. One that stands out is the demolished church in Coventry. Many years later, I went back overseas and took some pictures of the rebuilt church.

(I have since given most of my photos to the National War Museum, and was the first to answer its call for women's service uniforms to be donated.)

We finished work at five o'clock, and right away Dorothy, her cousin and I would leave to go to dances – especially at the Hammersmith Palace, which had many bands. There was one kind of dance that the English girls called a "snowball" dance. We found it was like a spot dance; the girls would line up in the centre, and the men would come and touch you to ask you to dance. So you never knew if you'd be dancing with the date you came with!

But we could never stay as late as we liked as we always had to leave in time to catch the train on the Underground. We Canadian wrens were the youngest group over in England, and so we had many rules that other groups didn't: for instance, our curfew was nine o'clock! If you missed the Underground, you had to walk the streets at night during the blackout – and that was scary. You never knew who was around, and it was so dark you couldn't even make out people's faces.

London was full of American soldiers then, looking for English girls – though if they started following us, all we had to do was talk to them and they would go away. I think they were just looking for company, though – I never heard of crime during the war in England. I felt safer walking around at night there than I do here now. No one was scared in those days, at least not of each other. (However, I don't doubt there was the odd case of rape that we didn't know about. Perhaps there was a lot we didn't know about?)

There were several service clubs around where we lived, including a YWCA; but we were only allowed to go there during the week – the wireless girls had their time off on the weekends, and the club had to be kept open for them. During the week, though, the Y always had a place for us, even if it was just a cot. We had private names for each room and bed: the rooms were provinces, and the beds were cities. That was how you told your friends where you were: "I'm in Ontario, in bed Hamilton." We used to go on Y picnics as well, and would dance to nickelodeon machines.

The service clubs were also where the air force men came to stay – they would fight the enemy for so many days, and then come back and have some days off. Some of the Y hostesses would talk with them to offer support, and the Red Cross girls were also available to listen and talk to these men.

The three of us girls often spent our weekends and our leaves sightseeing. We travelled all over the southern parts of England, and even up to Scotland – we would go to Edinburgh for the weekend. (The English girls thought we were crazy, going so far for such a short time.) We always travelled and booked our hotels as civilians, which meant that we didn't have to worry about wearing uniforms or saluting anyone. We figured that nobody would be any the wiser!

We saw Portsmouth, and the beautiful sandy beaches of the Isle of Wight, and one day we decided to take a train to Dover to see the famous White Cliffs. We didn't know where we were going; but when the train stopped, we got off and hopped onto a waiting bus. When the bus came to the end of its route, we got out and looked about – but couldn't see any cliffs. We thought we'd have to cross the sea to some land we could vaguely see in the distance; so when some English soldiers came along, we naively asked: "How do we get across the water to the White Cliffs of Dover?"

They looked at us in surprise. "That's Calais, on the coast of France, across the Channel. You're standing on the cliffs!"

Before our travelling, though, we were as green as grass. When we first arrived in London, nobody told us anything! For instance, about the English railway custom of the "platform ticket," which you had to have in addition to your train ticket. We'd go to the station and pay our "thruppence" (English for three pennies). When we got off at our destination, we would be asked for our tickets. We didn't have any, so we'd pay our thruppence again. We travelled like that for a month before we found out that we'd just been paying to be on the platform, not purchasing our fares!

All through this time, I would write letters to my family back home. My sister told me later that whenever there was a family dinner or some special event, my mother would always say, "I wonder how poor Lorna is doing." Then shortly after that they'd get a letter from me, saying that I was having a good time and doing this, that and the other thing!

On V-E Day, we went into work because we hadn't yet received the Admiral's Rules telling us that we had the day off. But when we got there, our officers told us that we were free to go. The parties went on all night in the streets – people just came out with whatever food they had, and we would all just eat, sing and be merry. The strict British liquor licensing rules were set aside: when we went into a pub, we were given a shot glass – and told to hold onto it, because they were in short supply. Then for the rest of the day, whenever we saw a pub we would go in and get a shot – and then sit out on the sidewalk, drinking it. It was a wonderful spontaneous celebration, with everyone gathered together. We went up to Buckingham Palace three times.

That night, all the lights went back on – that was the most touching thing, after years of blackouts, and something I'll always remember! It was a Sunday evening, and all the children were looking up in awe. The littlest ones, five and six years old, had never seen lights like this – they had only known darkness at night. When everything was suddenly lit up, they were scared and would cry!

V-J Day was expected that August. Everyone was waiting for it, and they had souvenirs out and ready. By then, there was nothing more for us to do in England; so we were sent back to Ottawa to be discharged. It was an awful feeling, returning to Canada and not knowing what I would be doing next. I came home in December as a Leading Wren. We travelled home on the old *Isle de France* – the French crew gave us each a present of perfume.

Being discharged was a big let-down, because you had been looked after for so many years. It was a sad experience, coming back and being told I wasn't needed any more. I didn't know what I was going to do. The option of becoming a photojournalist didn't exist back then: there was some restriction against women in darkrooms, and we weren't allowed to work there. (In those days, women were restricted in a lot of things that were considered "men's jobs.") I knew that after the war, Commander Newton was working with the *Globe and Mail*, but even he couldn't hire us because of the restrictions.

But since I had worked for the government before, I had a position there when I came back; and I began working at the Royal Canadian Mint. The girls I had worked with when I first entered the government were now making 90 dollars a month and I got the same when I went back – even though I had been away for so long. That was a big pay increase over the wrens. (Though when we retired from the wrens, we were paid an allowance of 7 dollars and 50 cents every month we'd been in Canada, and 15 dollars for every month we'd been overseas.)

I worked at the Mint until I married, when I was retired on the basis of marital status! I didn't need to quit or want to; but when my employers found out I was about to marry, I was *told* that I had to leave my job. At that time, married women weren't allowed to work for the government – unless of course you were a private secretary or had some other "important" job. That was just government policy.

Eventually, though, this policy was changed; and in 1953 I went back into the government, working as night staff with the Superannuation

Department. A new act had come in dealing with government retirement funds, and sixty girls were hired for four months to transfer the files over. I ended up staying for five years. Then I returned to Statistics Canada and worked there till 1978, when I retired. When my pension was calculated, the government carried over my time in the armed forces and added it into my public service years.

I was always interested in what was going on around me and in keeping politically informed, and being in the service made me more so. I also became much more independent – I used to be quite shy and lacking in self-confidence. (Lieutenant Alvey always used to say to me, "No one is going to hurt you.") If a girl is looking for a career, I certainly think the service is great. I really enjoyed my time in the navy, with all of the travelling and meeting so many nice people. But above all, I'm very proud that I did my part in the war.

Olive Renaud –
née Villeneuve

When the Second World War was declared in September 1939, I was single and living with my parents in the village of La Plaine, Quebec. I was the oldest of eight children, four girls and four brothers; and I took on the education of my youngest sister, who wanted to become a schoolteacher. Like most citizens, we heard the news that would change our lives on the radio.

Times were hard then. The farmers had only the revenues of their land to live on, and it was a hard existence. My own father lost his farm – a property of some 170-acres – because he couldn't come up with the 500 dollars second mortgage payment. It was terrible. Those people had nothing to fall back on; there was no system of farmers' assistance in those days

After losing the farm, my family moved into an uncle's house, which we rented for 5 dollars a month. I was nineteen then, and paid the rent with the 5 dollars a week I earned from working as a maid and nanny in a private home. I took care of nine children and did all the household chores, including the washing. I still remember the huge quantity of ironing – the older boys in the family worked in offices, and needed the collars and cuffs of their white shirts starched to perfection.

In 1939, things started to look up economically. The CIL plant in Shawinigan was expanding its operations to meet the demands of the war by producing ammunition. It started hiring labourers to construct its new plant at St-Paul l'Hermite. The construction was heavy manual work, pick-and-shovel work, such as the local farmers were very much accustomed to; and since they had just finished their fall labour, you can imagine that all of them applied. Nearly all that applied were hired, before the city boys from Montreal! And the same thing happened at the Plant Bouchard in Blainville, fifteen miles from my home – that plant was to produce ammunition for the Lancaster bombers.

So you see, even before Canada actively sent military personnel overseas, the effects of the war were already being felt in our Canadian industries – especially the ammunition plants. There was work for every able body, and the farmers really took advantage of it. Families in catholic Quebec were quite large at that time, so imagine how it improved their lives if three, four or even five people in the household started bringing home a weekly salary! It certainly was quite a supplement to the family income.

All of a sudden, in 1939, everyone could get loans from the bank – the financial institutions knew they were good for it. There was more work available than anyone could ever have imagined. People started repairing their homes, investing in the farms, etc. And when the new plants finally opened, women started to apply for the jobs as well.

One of my sisters worked in the office at the Plant Bouchard. Not only was there a great deal of the stereotypical office work for females, they were also hired to work on the actual production lines. The men were then free to join up and serve their country, to defend the liberties of freedom.

By the spring of 1941 I was tired of working in private homes. A girl, named Margo Lefebvre, who lived at the home where I worked, had a job in the office at Plant Bouchard. She asked why I did not work at the Plant. I told her I had applied, but had not heard from the company yet. She said I should go back and speak to her, and she would personally handle my application.

I must tell you, my father was not very happy – he didn't even want me to ride with him and his friends to the plant the following Monday. After all, I was just a girl. But I told him it was too bad, I was going with them anyway. Then somehow the local priest, father Odias Valois, got wind of my plan to go work at the plant. He came to my parents' house and told me he had found me a job at yet another private home: a lady had given birth, and I was to go help out. I told him I wouldn't go; that was over, and I was going to work at the plant. He said I could not do that – I would be "lost" if I went to work there. He was afraid that I would learn bad things, I would become debauched and that my reputation would be ruined!

That's how things were in those days: parents were very strict, and parish priests made it their business to oversee the behaviour of their parishioners. I told him I was going. I said the same thing to my father, and I asked my mother to make me a lunch. My mother was very happy, and supported my decision. But of course, she couldn't say much, since my father was so dead set against it – and in those days, of course, the man was the head of the household. Women's opinions did not count for very much. But next day I got into the car with my father and the other men, and headed off to work at the plant.

My first paycheque was for 23 dollars and 5 cents. After a while, I was promoted to work in the service department, and my pay was raised from 23 cents an hour to 30 cents. A normal ten-hour day paid me 3 dollars – far better than the measly 5 dollars a week I had been earning as a housekeeper!

My next job at the plant was in the cordite department. The cordite was like long strings of spaghetti of different lengths. We had to wrap it around a sort of anvil, tie it with elastics and special wrapping cord, secure it with a special knot, and cut it. It was very precise work, with no room for error. The inspectors were always checking the work. I worked for two Scottish sisters named Mary and Florence Glenn. They were from Cote St. Louis, near Ste. Therese, and were completely bilingual. There were about forty-five workers, with some five more inspecting our work. They would check to make sure that the charges were well sewn, and that the igniter's needle did not cross over into the inner circle

I spent three years on the cordite, and after a while I was made forewoman, or "contre-maitresse." I remember particularly having to control the Wiser scissors we used: they were of very high quality, and the women used to steal them all the time. They all sewed, mended, quilted, knitted and crocheted, and had been extremely poor until recently – so these scissors were very attractive to them. I had to explain to the girls that it wasn't worth losing such a high-paying job just for the sake of a pair of scissors!

In 1941, two government employees came to speak to us at a lunchtime meeting. They were very uncomfortable announcing the news: from now on, we would all have something called "income tax" taken off our pay cheques. These would be provincial and federal taxes, along with a few pennies going towards a new plan called "Unemployment Insurance." Before then, whatever salary you made was yours, clear of any taxes.

They made such a big thing of this announcement, and assured us that these taxes were only temporary and would be lifted after the war. I wonder if those two gentlemen actually believed what they told us! But it was not as though we had a choice in the matter.

In 1942 I was sent on a two-week course, on 20-millimetre ammunition, in Montreal. A lot of women liked to work there, because there were more men in that department. We used a great deal of paint thinner there, and it was pretty potent stuff to handle, even wearing gloves. My job was to set up an exposition of the work we did at the Plant Bouchard. We set up a complete production line on the seventh floor of the Eaton's store, to show the public what we did. It was pretty tricky to rotate the staff so that all of them could work at the front of the line, where all their family and friends could see them.

The plant at St. Paul l'Hermite went on strike for better pay. Our plant did not; however, we did benefit from the strike, and my salary was augmented to 75 cents an hour – the same as the men were getting. Of course, it was not equal pay for equal work; we forewomen were never told what our male counterparts, the foremen, were making. But it was more than the regular women workers made. The men always made more than the women did, even for doing the same work. That was an accepted reality of life in those days. We women were so grateful just to be able to earn money, that no one complained.

Women really entered the workforce during the war. Before that, only traditional "female" positions were available to us: bank teller, teacher, nurse or secretary. Now, not only were women welcome in the Armed Forces, but also they made themselves a niche in industry - sometimes in jobs that were very dangerous. The ammunition plants were not always a safe place to work, and work safety was not very much a priority in those days. We were all aware that gunpowder was very explosive; but it was not known at the time just how toxic it was.

It is a medical fact that a great number of people, mostly women, suffered from the side effects of gunpowder. People who worked with it always looked yellow - their skin was actually stained. After the First World War, especially in England, they were called the Yellow Women. Some became infertile. Those women never went to the front; but without knowing it, their lives were put in constant danger - as were their hopes of a future family.

During the boom, there must have been about 3,000 people working there. There was no Family Allowance in those days, so the women were very happy to work, and very pleased to be able to buy clothes, fabric, shoes for their children, etc. Those of us who had survived the hard times really appreciated having money. It was not a question of women taking over the men's jobs: the men were already gone, overseas. The entire family benefited, and it certainly gave a boom to the economy.

I worked at the Plant Bouchard for five years. I resigned in April 1945, just before I was to get married on May 3. In fact, I was on my honeymoon when the Armistice was signed. And of course, after the war, most of the women went back to their daily lives at home; and the men got jobs in the mills or went back to farming.

I was very lucky to get work at the Plant Bouchard. I contributed at a time when the need was there; and it was good economically for my family and myself. Women then helped make way for the women of today in industry, as well as in the Services. It was a good period of my life, and I enjoyed it. I still hold dear the memories of that time.

1. Marcella Menard (on left) enjoys ice cream with some of the other wrens.
2. U-190, captured German submarine.
3. Ruth Stuart making contact prints.

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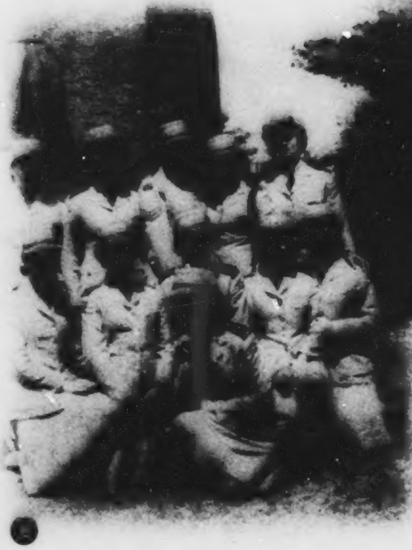
4. Taking a break for tea in the nissan hut.

5. Jeanne Bouchard on the Citadel during the Quebec City Allied Conference, 1943.



6. Marie Hauyan (left), Alison MacKenzie (centre) and Norma Marshall (right) sitting on one of the cement tank barriers in amongst the nissan huts.
7. Alma McCaffrey on truck.
8. Jeanne Bouchard, class picture.

9. Lillian Northrup (Ward) on telescope, Biddy Drewbrook with semaphore flags and Vicki LaPrairie on the lamp.

10. Ablution and washing hair in issue, flannelette pyjamas.

11. Doris Harper (on right) in front of Holwood House in Toronto.

Ruth Gray –
née Biggs

I was originally from London, Ontario. My family moved quite often because of my father's job: he was an accountant with British munitions and supplies. I had always had a job, ever since my first paper route when I was nine years old. For the first two years of the war before I enlisted, we went from Hamilton to Ottawa, and then to Toronto – where I worked in a munitions factory for the summer, grinding the casings. Then we moved back to St. Catharines, where I drove a salvage truck for the summer, picking up anything that could be reused or recycled. ("Recycling" wasn't a term that was used in those days, and salvaging wasn't even discussed.) Trying to operate a four-wheel-drive truck was quite an experience – I had only been driving for a year at that point. I could never find the reverse gear, so I just had to go around the same way all the time!

Well, I was a rebellious teenager and I couldn't tolerate my father; so I decided that when I turned eighteen I would join the air force – then I wouldn't have to move around any more. I enlisted in June 1942, on my eighteenth birthday, while my father was away. He didn't know what I had done until everything was signed and sealed. Then he tried to undo it – he thought he had people he could manoeuvre. But he couldn't undo it, and he wasn't very happy about that! My mother was great, though. She found out what I'd done a week later, because my school called her to say that the army needed my school marks; and would she come in and pick them up, or did she want them just sent straight out? She thought, "Well, if you've done it, then you've done it."

At the end of August I went to Rockcliffe, in Ottawa, for my basic training. We were issued our uniforms, including underwear. Our panties had no elastic, because there was no rubber available during the war, so they had buttons on them. One Sunday evening I was walking back from church with some of the fellows and girls – when all of a sudden, my panties were down around my ankles. The button had come off. I just walked out of them and picked them up!

I became deathly ill from the tetanus shot we received, and I remember wondering if I was going to live. Overall, though, I enjoyed basic training. It was outdoors and there was a variety of things to do. After that we went on to trade training, which was also done at Rockcliffe. They gave us assessment tests to see where our talents were, and I qualified for Fighter Operations. We were given further training by some British officers, and then we had six months experience doing trade training in Rockcliffe before we were finally posted to Halifax.

Then, in the summer of 1943, I was posted to Newfoundland. Sixty of us flew there via Nova Scotia. The trip took us three days because of the fog: it kept rolling in, and they had to keep returning us to Sydney. Newfoundland was considered a "hardship" posting then, because it was still officially part of Britain – the province was only brought into Confederation in 1949, a few years after the war. When we went over there, we had to wear "Canada" flashes on our uniforms above the wings. (But at that point, I didn't even realize we were leaving Canada!)

Newfoundland was quite an experience. There were 5 miles of paved road from the American base out to their airport, and that was all the paved road St. John's had at that point! We were to be attached to the Americans there, who needed us for their fighter room operations: they had the room all set up, but no trained staff. We were the only ones trained as filter clerks, and they knew we were ready to go.

Fighter operations was an interesting trade, and there weren't many of us in it. We had three or four radar stations along the coast, and they would give our clerks the information we needed to keep track of the aircraft. The station would get the latitude and longitude readings for all the aircraft flying overhead from Halifax or Dartmouth, to ascertain where they were going and at what speed they were travelling. Then they would send us the voice reports, and we would plot each one on our special tracking tables. These indicated how many aircraft there were, what height they were flying, which direction they were travelling, and whether they were allies or enemies. These tracking tables were all done manually, with long poles that looked almost like billiard cues – we used them to move the little stand that indicated the number of aircraft and the airflow. We could then track them across the map. The tracks would go off our table in mid-Atlantic; but there was enough overlap that we knew they would be picked up by the Brits.

If we lost an aircraft from the table, there would be immediate information coming in from radar about what had happened to it. The radar tracked all the aircraft; so if something happened to one, the figure of the aircraft would just disappear.

To people living on the mainland, all this wasn't that important; but to those in Britain and Newfoundland it sure was. There were aircraft carriers then, but mostly the aircraft were flown over – especially the bombers, because they were so big. Besides, flying them over was the quickest way to get them to where they were needed. At the time we arrived, the Americans were flying 300 to 500 bombers over to Britain every night – and some were flown by women! The Americans were ahead of us in having women pilots, and I really regret that I was never able to meet any. They were real trailblazers.

In some ways, being in Newfoundland was just like being in Britain. We felt under fire. We weren't really being shot at, but we could hear gunfire from outside. We were literally on an island, and there were icebergs and German submarines around us. Often convoys would come into the St. John's harbour and then would not be able to leave for weeks on end, because of the enemy submarines blocking their path. (We knew the submarines were coming as far up the St. Lawrence River as Montreal, but we couldn't say that.)

There were other similarities to Britain: the mandatory blackout shutters on the East Coast, for instance, to prevent lights from showing where the towns were. And our food was atrocious – we ended up getting quite ill from lack of fresh fruit and vegetables. Our Canadian authorities didn't realize that that type of food supply could be flown in. We were put on vitamins to supplement our diets, which consisted mainly of dried apples, dried fruit, powdered milk, powdered potatoes and powdered eggs. (Later, when I was raising my family, I couldn't give them powdered milk – I just couldn't stand it any more. I dislike carrots too. That's the only vegetable we had on the station, and they were always half-cooked and horrible.)

Our saving grace was being with the Americans – they had everything. Their Post Exchange (PX) store had food such as fresh milk, chocolate bars and steaks, as well as clothing. We Canadians had nothing like that. The Americans I met were really nice people – we dated some of them, and obtained some privileges that way! We also had excellent support from the Salvation Army – no matter where we went, they were there before us. At St. John's, they had a recreational hut already set up for us when we arrived. They were marvellous people, and I've always supported them in return.

About six months after we arrived in St. John's, there was a draft to go overseas. We all applied; but the required age was twenty-one – and unfortunately, they found out that most of us weren't even twenty yet! The age for the Newfoundland draft was set even higher, at twenty-three, because of its designation as a hardship posting – I've often wondered how we ended up there. (A book called *Props On Our Sleeves* talks about the story of the age limit.) But the Americans needed us, so they had to leave us there.

Several of my friends who were over twenty-one were able to go overseas to England; the rest of us were stuck in St. John's. I loved it there, though; the people were marvellous, the salt of the earth. They were scattered about, living here and there, with their Newfoundland music. Some families we met would ask us to visit them in their homes for meals. No matter who you were, they would give you half. What a wonderful people they were.

But I really saw a distinction between Canada and Newfoundland at that time – their way of living was so different from ours. Conditions there were primitive: the people still depended on the sea for their livelihood. They all had wooden racks for drying their cod in the sun, and coal was carried around in horse-drawn two-wheeled carts.

I would love to go back to Newfoundland: we did very few tourist things there, because we lived on the base. But we did go to a regatta on Lake Quidi Vidi, just on the outskirts of St. John's. It was held every year, and even the navy took part. This regatta was almost like a farm fair, and it was a great weekend for everyone.

One Sunday morning we came off our shift at 8 a.m., and found that a church parade had been ordered. That meant that we had to get home, have some breakfast, and then quickly dress in full uniform, with everything polished, to be on parade by 10:30 a.m. I thought, "I'm not going!" So I didn't. For that I was put on CB – confined to barracks – for a week, for refusing to obey an order. Two hundred other people on base had also refused to do the same thing! – but five women and five men were selected for punishment, as examples. Of course I had to be one of them. The ten of us survived our CB, scrubbing floors and reporting every hour to the Service Police. The next time there were orders for a church parade, I obeyed them.

(But I found out afterwards that I could have marched to the door of the auditorium where the parade was, and then broken off! That way, I wouldn't have been refusing to obey the order.)

Then in early 1945, after a year and a half in Newfoundland, I was posted back to Dartmouth. I was there for only a few weeks before being posted out to Vancouver Island, to be stationed at Pat Bay.

So it ended up that on V-E Day, I was on a train from Halifax going right across the country. We were stopped at Wawa, Ontario, when the news arrived of the war being over. I remember seeing a Mountie there, sitting proudly on his horse holding a Union Jack. (That was the flag we served under then, not the present Canadian flag).

But there were still the Japanese to fight, so we kept going to Vancouver. When we arrived there, we were all involved in training the fighter pilots in Mosquitoes. These were excellent planes for low-level flying, staying underneath the Japanese radar. This was important, because the common thinking was that the Japanese would be a threat to us on the West Coast – which they were.

We worked hard in Pat Bay , both on our shifts and off them. In our time off we usually headed out to see the local farmers, because they had nobody to work for them. A group of us were hired on a potato farm, planting and hoeing potatoes in the fields. The ground was dusty and dry, because there'd been no rain for six months. We worked from early morning until 5 p.m., with breaks for tea and lunch. We also helped out the fruit farmers – I ate more fruit that summer than I had ever eaten in my life.

When the war finally ended, after V-J Day, I decided that I wanted to go back to university. Even at twenty-one, I didn't have a goal of what I wanted to achieve. I thought, "Well, I'll try university, I've only been out of high school for three years." But when I registered at McMaster, I discovered that it wasn't for me.

I still had four months left of my veterans grants, so I decided to take a business course. I attended a business school in Hamilton and learned shorthand, rapid calculation, typing and bookkeeping. It was an accelerated course and I did it! I came out with a business diploma, found a job, and then later found another as a clerk with Revenue Canada. After that, I never looked back – I worked for the government for twenty years, and finally took early retirement from my position in the House of Commons. I also found time to marry in 1949, and to raise five children!

(One memorable incident from my time in the House of Commons was when the Canadian flag was introduced in 1964. Thousands of designs were submitted for consideration, and the flag they finally came up with was put together from several designs. The new flag wasn't really Canadian to me: I was used to the red, white and blue of the Union Jack. But the concern was that if the flag was flying against a blue sky, it wouldn't stand out enough – they wanted only the red and white, and left the blue off it. For me, it was an adjustment.)

After the war, I applied for my medals. I knew I was eligible for two: the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal, and the 1939-1945 medal for service during the war. But when they came, I found out I had three! I thought, "Why is this?" So I read the descriptions, and found out that the third one was the British Defence Medal – because Newfoundland was considered part of Britain during the war. I read that I had earned the medal by defending British territory!

Throughout the war, women in uniform were generally well accepted – though there were always some exceptions. When I was at a dance at McMaster, for instance, this young chap asked me to dance. "Aren't you a little bit older than the other students?" he asked. I told him this was because I had been in the air force for three years – and he just dropped me, right there in the middle of the dance floor. "Air force, I don't want anything to do with those women!" he said. I think that happened because some of the men had negative attitudes towards women in the services. They didn't think women should do that kind of thing. (And also, some of the girls who joined up in the beginning did go hog-wild, and made a bad name for a lot of women.)

What sticks out most in my mind from my service days is the friendships we made. I made it to the Montreal reunion at McGill University in 1995 by the skin of my teeth – a chance acquaintance from the Legion talked me into it. When I went to the welcome wine-and-cheese at the reunion, a woman walked up to me and said, "Aren't you Ruth Biggs? I'm Marg Norum."

Well, back in basic training there were four of us who became good friends and went out to Newfoundland together: Marg Norum from out West, Isabelle White from Ripley, Ontario., Zella Stade from Chilliwack, and me. But the other three were old enough to go on the overseas draft, and I had lost track of them. I hadn't seen Marg since 1943, and now it was 1995! She said, "I've looked for you at every reunion." I said: "I've often wondered what happened to the three of you after you went overseas. I have a picture of Isabelle with her gas mask in London, I wonder where she is?" Then a lady at the next table turned around and said, "Well, I'm here!"

Then I asked about Zella – I'd gone to her place in Chilliwack several times, and always missed her. Then all of a sudden this other voice said, "Well, I never knew that." So there were the four of us, fifty-two years later! Now I hear from them all the time. That's the kind of thing that happens to you when you're in the air force.

I wish the young people of today knew so many things. They have a lot of misconceptions about what women were allowed to do during the war years – many people incorrectly believe that women couldn't drive cars, for instance. Well, when I was a teenager I wasn't going to sit around. I recognized that I had a right to my own life, and forced my parents to let me get my licence and learn to drive. Maybe I was a bit ahead of my time then. (And today, many seniors are incapacitated in various ways; so now the women often drive the men around.)

I also work with the Youth Education program of the Royal Canadian Legion, to teach school classes about Canada's place in history. Many younger people don't know about their history, and about the wealth of information that veterans have about it. When the veterans went overseas for the 50th anniversary of Vimy Ridge, for instance, I was helping some students with a project on Vimy Ridge and Canada's part in the two World Wars. And I've just finished working with some Grade 7 and 8 classes on a project about Billy Bishop and what he did for Canada's war effort. I'm not glorifying war, but I do think it had to happen if we were not to be overrun by dictators and lose our rights.

I think we would have fewer youth problems if we had mandatory military service at eighteen. When students finish high school, do they really know if they want to go on to university? They often get a general education, but only a few really know what they want to do and carry through with it. If young people had a year or two away from home, in a disciplined setting – having to both follow orders and handle their own things – they might discover that they'd rather be doing something other than what was originally in their minds. Possibly mandatory service could also increase patriotism.

I don't know how many youth are aware of the cadet programs, some of the best there are going. I'm involved with the air cadets, but there are also navy, army, and the militia for older kids. Those young people are learning discipline, which is lacking in our schools. Kids all think they have rights. Well, I've got rights too; and I think theirs should include patriotism, discipline and a background in Canadian history!

Things changed so drastically for women over the years. A few years ago I was at a Legion convention in Sudbury; and the speaker was Canadian astronaut Roberta Bondar. She praised our efforts, saying that if it hadn't been for us, women might not be accepted as astronauts today.

As for me, I certainly matured in a hurry in the air force. I was only eighteen when I went in; and believe me, I didn't know anything! But I learned how to protect myself, and I also learned discipline. I would do it again – if I were that age, and had that attitude.

Olive Woollard –
née Kirby

I lived in London, England, at the beginning of the Second World War. I had just finished grammar school and was ready to start into the workforce. But as the war became more and more imminent, my father decided that I should be evacuated with the school. I was sixteen, my brother was eleven, and we had just lost our mother to heart trouble.

What a decision it must have been for all the parents to send their children away! I was sent to a small town called St. Albans, and given a good billet with my school. Unfortunately, my brother wasn't as lucky. At his first billet he was treated very badly, even beaten. When this was discovered, he was transferred to a very nice family. But still, he was in Somerset and I was in Hertfordshire, many miles away – so there wasn't much contact between us.

After I'd spent nearly a year in St. Albans, my father decided I should come home to London. I started work with the government export licensing department, and stayed there until I joined the army. Around this time, the Germans started to bomb London. After I had left, the building I worked in was bombed and several people were killed.

In 1941 I decided to enlist in the Land Army, which had originally been formed during the First World War to recruit men into the British Forces. No oath was required; and in most areas of service, including mine, there were no ranks. We did have to wear uniforms, though. More than 10,000 women joined the Women's Land Army.

I was sent out to Wiltshire with a group of other women to join a threshing gang. It was quite the culture shock for a nineteen-year-old who had never been far from the big city, and had very little knowledge of country life! "Threshing" means getting the wheat grain from the sheaves made during the harvesting. My first day on the job, a mouse from the hayrick ran up my trouser leg. I screamed, and retrieved it by whacking myself. The locals were very amused, as they didn't think much of us.

There were three different jobs on the threshing crew, and we rotated them among us. One was to stand on top of the haystack and feed the sheaves into the threshing machine – hopefully not letting yourself go along with the sheaf! It was very dangerous. Another was standing on the rick and tossing the sheaves into the drum. The worst job was standing below, clearing the dust and dirt out of the machine. Despite scarves wrapped around your face, your eyes, ears, nose and mouth all became clogged.

Land Army shifts could be as long as fourteen hours, though luckily I never had to work that long. Still, the work was exhausting. As an office worker, my hands were unaccustomed to such hard work – and it showed! They were covered with blisters; and on one threshing shift, I managed to get dirt into one of them. My hand became poisoned, and I had to stay in a hospital while I recovered from the injury.

At first, I was army billeted with a young woman whose husband was away in the service and who had two small children. She saw in me a potential babysitter, which I was not about to become! We often fought about this. I remember one harrowing day when I had an accident on my way back from work: I fell off my ancient rickety bicycle. I was bruised and aching, and had to have stitches over one eye. Then when I arrived back at my billet, the young woman abused me and locked me in my room for the evening without food because I wouldn't babysit for her.

The next day I went to the Land Army office and complained, and they removed me from that billet and placed me with a very nice family until the threshing season ended. After that I was transferred to a hostel, where we would be picked up every morning and taken to our jobs. Depending on the season, our duties included driving tractors, milking cows, planting, harvesting, cleaning pigsties and cow sheds, reclaiming land, pruning, weeding, catching rats, heaving bales of hay and the like.

After this I was sent to a Royal Air Force station, to a job growing vegetables to feed the camp personnel. I worked with three other Land girls, two civilian men and an RAF sergeant. Life there seemed like a dream: we were well fed, and had full use of all the facilities. It was at this camp that I met my friend Beryl Dennett (later Buck), a wonderful person I still keep in touch with. She had left her job on a farm because the farmer's wife she was billeted with had not been pleasant to her.

I stayed with the Land Army until after the war was over, finishing my service in 1946. We were given six clothing coupons; but otherwise there was no relocation gratuity for us, as there wasn't for those who were in the Merchant Navy. Our release certificates instructed us to return our uniforms at our own expense – though we could keep our shoes and our big brown greatcoat, as long as we dyed it. I returned part of my uniform, along with the knickers and the trousers, which were like riding breeches.

For the longest time we Land Army troops were not acknowledged and not invited to any of the military parades. I believe it was 1995 before we were first allowed to parade along with the other veterans. I don't know if that honour has yet been extended to the big Armistice Day parade held at London's Cenotaph.

After the war I married and moved to the English countryside. In 1967 – back when Trudeaumania was in full swing! – my husband, our two daughters and I immigrated to Canada. We hoped to make a better life for our children. (One is now a nurse and the other a lawyer, so I believe that we succeeded.) Interestingly, my air force camp friend Beryl later also moved to Canada, and we now live quite near to each other.

As for the new skills that my army experience taught me: "hard work" about describes it! (The book *They Fought in the Fields,* by Nicola Tyrer, describes the Land Army in great detail and is a good source of information.) In my experience, women going into the military need to be able to adapt to all situations. What I most enjoyed was the companionship of living with the other girls – mostly they were a good bunch.

Freda 'Freddie' Little –
née Mayers

In 1939, when the war started, I was living at home with my parents and brother while attending high school in Hamilton. We had emigrated here from England in 1929, as had my mother's four brothers and sister in the early 1920s. My father, who had served with the British Army, was always listening to the news on the radio; so we were aware of the unrest in Europe, and concerned for relatives in England. When Canada entered the war, my brother felt it was his duty to join the army.

I had a job as a long-distance operator at Bell Telephone, and was friends with a girl named Jane Ellis who had started working there at about the same time as me. I often invited Jane home for lunch. Our route took us past the air force recruiting centre; and one day we decided to drop in and see if we could join the air force, as we were now of age. It was mostly her idea to enlist, but my parents didn't discourage me.

We were accepted and soon were on our way to Rockcliffe for basic training. What a wake-up call that was – being with girls from different provinces and countries, and having all those rules and regulations to follow!

In those days, there were mixed reactions to women enlisting. Some people thought us very daring. Others felt that women did not fight wars, men did. But Jane and I felt that if women could take over some of the menial tasks, we would free men for active duty. England was at war, and it needed more troops to help its effort.

We were assessed for our capabilities, and I was sent for Wireless Training in Montreal to learn to be a Radio Telephone Operator (RTO).

There we learned the intricacies of radio communication, Morse code and semaphore. I learned that RTOs were sent to bases where fighter pilots were trained on Hurricanes. These aircraft had little space for radio equipment, but they did have a two-way radio and a "scrambler" – a device that sent out a constant beeping signal. When the transmission was scrambled, it was our job to monitor that signal, calibrate its degree and phone it in to a tracking centre. Then the pilot could radio in and be guided back to base.

When training finished, we anxiously awaited our postings. Mine was to Gander, Newfoundland – not even a province of Canada at the time. We were briefed that this was an isolated station, and the men outnumbered the women. It was also an old U.S. Air Force Base, and parts of it would be off limits to us.

In late February, we were put on the train to Halifax and then to Yarmouth to await a boat to Newfoundland. Most of us had never been out of Ontario before, so this was quite an adventure. When we got to Newfoundland, we boarded the infamous train known as the "Newfie Express." There were few roads at that time, and we had to stop at every village to drop off milk or pick up goods or mail.

At Gander we were shown to our barracks, which overlooked the railway tracks. We quickly found it was common to see a group of local men setting off down the tracks in the morning, and returning later in the day with a long stick over their shoulders on which their catch of rabbits was strung. This, we were told, was "dinner."

There was a village nearby with a general store, though not your present-day supermarket. (One of the items available was canned rabbit.) We were allowed to go into the village, but we had a well-stocked base canteen. Our meals weren't too bad once we got used to powdered eggs and milk. Fresh vegetables were a rarity.

Many of us haunted the post office for letters and care packages from home. There was a gym and a swimming pool on the base, and also bowling alleys, a ski shop, a theatre and a library. We had our own radio station, and weekly dances with music played by the station band. For an isolated station we were pretty well looked after.

I didn't find that we were treated any differently than the men. I did feel, though, that the female officers were more tolerant of us – probably because their training made them better able to understand what we were experiencing.

I found the Newfoundlanders to be simple, hard-working and unpretentious people, mostly loggers and fishermen. I didn't come across any different customs – other than the rabbits!

We soon got used to aircraft taking off every two minutes, night after night. These were the bombers, leaving from Canada and the U.S., after a stop for refuelling. Several times, German subs were spotted off the coast.

Some nights there were discussion groups. One memorable guest was Joey Smallwood, who would become the province's first Premier when it joined Confederation in 1949. He was an eloquent speaker, convinced that Newfoundlanders could better their way of life under his guidance.

At the end of the war there was much jubilation. But it also meant that our job was coming to an end, and we had to prepare for civilian life again. Wartime had changed life for women. We had proven ourselves capable, and shown that nursing, teaching and stenography were not our only options. But would there be jobs? How would our newly acquired skills affect our employability?

After going back to Rockcliffe for our discharges, I returned to civilian life and was accepted back into my position at Bell Telephone. Of all the people I met during my Service years, the most memorable was Barney Little, the coach of our base basketball team: I married him after V-E Day. The War Grants enabled my new husband to attend university – a goal he had only dreamed of before. I chose married life and raised eight children. (None of them joined the Forces, though I would not have discouraged them had it been their choice.)

I never regretted joining the service and was proud to end the war as a Leading Air Woman. As a career option for women, the military gives an opportunity to experience a certain amount of discipline and respect, learn new skills and meet new people. Clothes, lodging and medical care are all provided, and there are opportunities for education and travel.

Military life taught me that women were more capable than men thought, or would admit! It changed me, made me more confident in myself. I also learned to respect other people's faiths and beliefs, and to recognize that my way wasn't the only way. I made many friends; and though I have only been to two actual reunions, those friendships have endured over the years.

Alison MacKenzie –
née Sparks, formerly Tucker

When war broke out in September 1939, I was just finishing my vacation along the Rideau River at a friend's cottage. But I was only sixteen years old then, and it seemed important to go back to Glebe Collegiate and complete my education.

When I left school in 1940, there were few job opportunities. But I was fortunate and had the chance to work for the first Victory Loan Drive, assembling advertising pamphlets to be distributed across Canada. After the 1940 census, I got a job with the Dominion Bureau of Statistics, coding the information that had been gathered across Canada. (I remember that when Winston Churchill visited Ottawa, our entire building was allowed out to line his route to Government House.)

But more and more of my neighbours and school friends were joining the armed forces, and so I began to see myself in uniform too – preferably the air force. Throughout my childhood, I'd spent many hours with my dad watching airplanes take off and land at Uplands Base; and that gave me the idea that maybe I could fly too. My family has a history of serving its country for generations back: my great-grandfather served in the Crimean War, and his commission was signed by Queen Victoria.

So in 1941, still underage at eighteen (and underweight at 92 pounds) I nevertheless decided that I was the one in my family who should go to war. I took my tests and waited for word from the recruiting station. Shortly before my nineteenth birthday, I was called up and sent off to Rockcliffe, Ottawa, for my basic training. I was a bit of a rebellious person, so no one was really surprised at my enlisting – and many of my acquaintances did too.

When the training was over, some girls were posted across the country, and some of us were chosen to stay in Ottawa to work at a conference for the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP). A temporary building was erected on Sussex Drive, close to the Chateau Laurier, to accommodate the many high-level delegates from all the Allied countries. I remember General Chen from China, Harold Balfour from Britain, Sir William Glasgow, the Australian High Commissioner, and many others. The conference was top secret, and the building was guarded by the RCMP. My job was to personally deliver documents to various embassies in Ottawa and to the prime minister, Mackenzie King. We worked long hours, once without sleep for twenty-four hours.

When the conference was over, we were all interviewed and asked what we would like to do in the air force. I thought I'd like to take up Code and Cypher, and said so. But in the meantime I was posted to No. 2 Service Flying Training School (SFTS) at Uplands, outside Ottawa. I was a timekeeper, keeping track of the student pilots' hours in the air in "G" and "H" flight.

Airwomen had to take a familiarization flight, so F/O Jack Hopkins, a flight instructor, took me up in a Harvard. He tried very hard to make me sick with his rolls and turns, but I had a strong stomach and was all right – just very sleepy from the shortage of oxygen. After the flight, I promptly fell asleep on duty! Then came my call. Code and Cypher wasn't available, but I was posted to No. 1 Wireless School in Montreal for the first class of airwomen. This was my chance to get my training, with a view to going overseas one day – that was my ultimate goal, as that's where all the action was.

The six-month wireless course was tough: some of the girls just couldn't grasp the dots and dashes. We learned how to build a super-heterodyne radio, operate transmitters, do semaphore signalling and use Aldis lamps; and we also did precision squads and route marches. I managed to graduate and get my "Twenty-Five Words A Minute" certificate. Air Marshal Lloyd Breadner himself took the salute at our final parade.

Then I left for the East Coast. At Eastern Air Command in Halifax, I was able to polish my Morse code skills, taking messages by typing and even learning to operate a "bug." That was, for those days, what you'd call "cutting edge technology"! It was a much faster, very professional wireless key for sending Morse code. (You pressed it sideways rather than up and down, so it was much speedier.)

But these skills would be forgotten soon enough: when I actually went overseas, I found myself sending messages at twelve words a minute or less, to wireless air gunners who could barely hear the code above the noise of their four-engine bombers – and who sent messages back with gloved frozen hands in the frigid air hundreds of feet up.

Our trip to England aboard the French ship *Louis Pasteur*, along with ten thousand troops, was rough. Nearly everyone got seasick as we zig-zagged across the ocean; and it seemed freezing cold to us when we landed in Liverpool on July 1, 1943. Then we were transported by train south to Bournemouth. The next morning, five thousand people sat down to a breakfast of beans, fried potatoes and sausages at the Bowling Green Mess Hall.

We were supposed to be billeted at the Hotel Metropol, but it had been bombed shortly before and several Canadians were killed. So we were scattered in several other hotels and private homes. We learned that the seaside was a dangerous place to be: the Germans were targeting our ports to destroy our supply chain. We were ordered not to go to the beaches at Bournemouth; and we knew enough not to go to the beaches, as the enemy was strafing them. We had to get permission to travel to Ireland, it was out of bounds to us.

My final destination was No. 6 Group Headquarters for the Canadian Bomber Command at Allerton Park in Yorkshire. The wireless section was in the basement of Lord Mowbray's castle – his property had been taken over by the military, and he spent the war years living in a small house nearby. We all lived in Nissen huts in the surrounding woods, the women in one section and the airmen on the other side of the castle.

My job at No. 6 Group HQ was to send out the time signal every half hour. I would signal "BV9 BV9 PTF 1320 AR" and repeat it once – then listen for anyone trying to reach BV9, our call signal. (Only airmen in dire straits were allowed to contact headquarters; otherwise, they were supposed to call their own station.)

When I first arrived, I had been warned of the pressure of my post – I was told that the set I was on was the most important one in the room, as the situations encountered were usually life and death.

So there was a lot of stress; and when the first message came through, the buildup of all the warnings made me panic. I suddenly realized I was dealing with the real thing, that someone was really in trouble out there! I was shaking so hard that one of the other wireless operators, Fred Tucker, looked over and realized something was wrong. He came over, pulled me out of the way and took the message himself. I was grateful to him, and I was fine after that. That was the beginning of a lifelong friendship!

These incoming transmissions were sent upstairs to the Operations Room for decoding and action. Lives could be saved: for instance, a message might come in from a bomber that had seen people in distress on the ocean. Knowing their location enabled Operations to send out a rescue mission.

Any emergencies, such as rescues or diversions, were transmitted to our bombers on our frequency, in a code that was changed daily. (Though unfortunately, the enemy soon found out our frequency and spent the rest of the war jamming our signals: messages were difficult to send and receive.)

All the sections – wireless, ops and teleprinters – worked around the clock. Together we were the headquarters for the satellite stations, which all had their own wireless operators. Transmissions between the other stations were monitored by our section to ensure that all messages were kept professional. There was strong security at Allerton Park: we had heavy curtains on all the windows, and guards at each door.

Even everyday life was a challenge. Yorkshire can be very cold in winter and sometimes it snowed. My Nissen hut – known as "The Canned Crabs" – housed some twenty girls, numerous mice, and sometimes a cat. It had a small Quebec heater in the centre of the building, on which we often made tea and sometimes toasted bread on wire hangers. Our beds consisted of a cast-iron cot with three bundles of straw for mattresses, and a bolster of twigs for a pillow. (The Canadian Red Cross heard about these bolsters, and sent small pillows to the airwomen. When we got them, we burned the bolsters in the stove!)

And our bath hut was some distance away, and unheated. Taking a bath in a Nissen hut was quite an experience: when the steam rose up to the corrugated-iron roof, cold beads of water would drop back down onto the hapless bather!

Castles are spooky places: occasionally we imagined we could hear footsteps on the upper floors, and what sounded like someone walking down the main staircase. Allerton Park was very old, with stone floors and intricate designs in the beautifully carved wood (which was boarded up to prevent someone carving their initials in it). In the basement, where our signals section was, a badminton court had been constructed in what used to be the dungeon. There was also a tunnel, which I was told led to a lookout tower about a mile away – intended to allow the inhabitants to spot any enemies before they reached the castle. A couple of us airwomen thought we would explore the tunnel, which was dark, cobwebby and dank. But a draught blew out our candles, and we gave up.

It wasn't only the inside of Allerton Park that was spooky. The castle was close to the Yorkshire moors and often shrouded in mist, especially at night. Because of the blackout, there were no outside lights anywhere in the country – especially not at air force stations and army bases. Sometimes at midnight, going on duty alone from the Nissen hut to the castle, not being able to see was daunting. One pitch-black night, I thought I heard something quite close: a thump, thump, and then silence. I was nervous but kept walking, trying to make out the outline of the castle. When I finally got there, I told the guard on duty about the funny noise. It turned out that I'd wandered too far off the main path and been scared by Lord Mowbray's Highland cattle, grazing away in their enclosure!

By the time we Canadians reached Allerton Park, however, the war raids were slowing down in the northern part of England – although Hull, the closest port city to us, was attacked a few times. There were air raid shelters and cement anti-tank barriers in the woods, scattered between our Nissen huts; but luckily they were never needed.

Number Six Group HQ was the heart of many bomber satellite stations of Lancasters and Halifaxes, crewed mainly by Canadians. Our Commander-in-Chief was Air-Vice Marshal "Black Mike" Clifford MacKay McEwen, a Royal Flying Corps veteran. Initially, though, the Group was organized by Group Captain Roy Slemon.

We airwomen were there to replace the men in Signals for more active duty. Most of them were sent to join the 2nd Tactical Air Force (TAF) – particularly No. 5252 "C" Mobile Signals Unit (MSU). They trained as commandos in appalling conditions, with portable receivers and transmitters, to toughen them up for the D-Day invasion of Normandy.

One of these airmen – the one who had noticed my distress and rescued me on my first shift in signals! – became my husband. That was "Tommy" Fred Tucker, from Waterloo, Ontario. We were married on March 28, 1944, in an 11th-century Norman church at Allerton Park. Our reception was in the station's recreation hall, and everyone who could attend was invited. The Squadron Leader in charge of the signals section, Noel Eaton (of Waterdown, Ontario), presented us with a cheque in English pounds worth about a hundred dollars. We newlyweds went to Devon for a short honeymoon; and our marriage lasted fifty-one years.

There were many happy and sad times in the service. I found some male members of the permanent force had a chauvinistic attitude towards airwomen, and we were underpaid in relation to servicemen doing the same jobs. However, the British people were very kind. I met two ladies I called Aunt Dot and Auntie Marjorie. They had posted a notice on a castle bulletin board volunteering to entertain airwomen for afternoon tea at their home in Stonegate, York, where they owned a lovely dress shop. It became my home away from home for the rest of my time in England; and for fifty years I wrote letters to them or their nephews and nieces.

Two of the saddest memories I have involve our airwomen. In 1943, a group of us were en route from Bournemouth to York in a troop train. We were stopped at a London station when one of the girls spotted her brother, an army officer, getting onto another train. They could only wave to each other, like ships passing in the night – and they never saw one another again. He was killed in France.

The other incident happened on Christmas Eve 1944, when our wireless section was on Operations and I was Acting Corporal. The bombers were over Germany on a raid that day. The telephone rang, and a teleprinter operator informed me that the husband of one of the WDs on duty had been reported missing. There was some delay, no one quite knew why; so it wasn't until the next day, during Christmas dinner, that Diana was told that Wally hadn't returned to base. As it happened, she was pregnant with their child – a son she named Linton, after the air station from which her late husband had flown out on his last mission.

Although all the death was sad, you had to get over it. We had to accept the fact that we might die instantly, and adopt a fatalistic attitude of having a good time today because next week you might be gone. But I chose not to worry about it, and tried not to think of the future at all. We were so busy that we just took each minute as it came along. The most planning I ever allowed myself to do was buying a Canada Savings Bond out of my pay.

When the war was over, we were sent home to Canada. I found that I had very little patience for the people who complained about shortages – when they had everything compared to the English, many of whom had had their homes bombed out. People in England just accepted things and went about their lives. One leave, we stayed with a woman in Sawbridgeworth who had had all three of her family homes bombed. There was no one to fix them, as the men were away, and anyway there was no money; so there was nothing to do but accept living in half a house! That's the way the British were.

Canadians would complain about small things like having a lumpy bed; but in London, some people were sleeping in the Underground every night! My work station was out in the woods, so I wasn't really close to what the people were going through. But I vividly remember going into London one night, when an entire apartment building had been bombed to the ground and rescuers were frantically digging for people. (If your job wasn't to help, you were supposed to just stay out of the way – which is what I did.)

All this experience taught me to appreciate things more back in Canada. Even if things weren't easy, it was better than having to start all over again.

After the war my home town of Ottawa sent me a Certificate of Appreciation, complete with a gold seal, for my war service. I worked in Reconstructions and Supply for a time, then quit to raise my three children and help my husband. In the early 1980s I took a part-time Arts degree at Western University in London; and in 1984 I was awarded my Bachelor of Arts degree, with a concentration in Visual Arts History. I also won a gold medal for attaining the highest graduating average among part-time students.

I have been active for many years in the Bomber Command Association, an offshoot of the British association – its patron is the Queen Mother.

For my service in the organization, I received the Governor General's 125 Commemorative Medal.

Perhaps because I was used to discipline at home, and of a rebellious nature, I enjoyed my time in the RCAF – I seemed to fit right in. I'm glad I joined: I loved it. I found that the war did mature me.

I think that air force life is wonderful – there really is "No Life Like It!" The services provide excitement, companionship, opportunities to learn about other people, and a chance to serve your country with pride. As long as you're prepared to move and can adjust to that, it's an excellent career choice. (And it pays well now too – in our day, during the war, we only received 90 cents a day.) My granddaughter is planning to attend Royal Military College in Kingston to become an officer.

Late in my life, in the mid-1990s, my war years came back to me in an unexpected way. Back in 1943, I had a friend, Joyce Skene, with whom I had worked and bunked at No. 2 SFTS in Ottawa. She went overseas at about the same time as I did, to RCAF HQ in London. She worked in Air Marshal Breadner's office; and there she met and married Andy MacKenzie from Montreal, a fighter pilot who went on to earn a Distinguished Flying Cross. He stayed in the air force, and he and Joyce lived in air force stations together for many years. Then they retired to Oxford Station, near Ottawa; and after fifty years of marriage, Joyce died from cancer in 1994 – a year before my husband Fred was also taken by cancer.

Over the years, I had always hoped to see Joyce again at the WD reunions I attended, but never did. At the last reunion, I was saddened to read about her death in an air force magazine. But two months later I met her widower, Andy, for the first time – and we are now married. We live at Oxford Station, and together we have a loving family of six children and eleven grandchildren. So far, I've had a wonderful life!

Doris Catherine Harper –
née Cale

I was born in Wales and came to Canada with my family as a child. I went to high school in Weyburn, Saskatchewan, and then later worked briefly at the Recruiting Centre for the South Saskatchewan Regiment. After a stint as a bank clerk, I applied to join the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service – I was drawn to the navy because I had already crossed the Atlantic three times on ocean liners, and remembered my family's voyages. As well, my younger brother had joined the navy.

So I signed up with the WRCNS in November 1942; and in February 1943, at the age of twenty-one, I was called to go to Galt, Ontario, for basic training. The navy was looking for bank clerks to fill positions as pay writers, which is what I became.

In our month of basic training, we had medicals, got checked by a dentist, learned about naval discipline and history and nautical terminology, and were taught how to march. We also received our allotments of clothing – though at first, because we were early in the system, the proper uniform suits were not yet ready for us. So we wore blue smocks about the base; and we were issued heavy greatcoats, worn with white scarves at the neck, to disguise the fact that we didn't have shirts and ties whenever we left the base.

We pay writers took our training in a beautiful mansion called Holwood House, at 78 Queen's Park Crescent in Toronto. (The captain's writers were trained there too and we paraded together, marching smartly around the nearby streets.) When the courses were over, some of us were informed that we would be sent to a port on the East Coast of Canada, HMCS Stadacona – but we were cautioned not to tell our families exactly where, and our letters home were censored.

We arrived in Halifax by train late at night, and boarded a large bus for our trip to the base. We had just got under way when our bus driver had to pull over to the side of the street – all the lights in the city had suddenly gone out. That was our first experience of a blackout. (Later, we discovered that the beautiful old stone building on Barrington Street we had stopped outside was Government House, the home of Nova Scotia's Lieutenant-Governor at the time.)

We were the first large group of wrens to be stationed in Stadacona, and we had fairly comfortable accommodations. Our barracks were in a large building originally designed as a school for electrical trainees. The first morning, when I looked out of the window, I was surprised to see an old graveyard right up against the building. On later inspection, we found that the gravestones marked the passing of sailors from accidents or disease – or, as one inscription read, "He suddenly fell down and expired."

I was assigned to work in Pay Division IV, in the nearby Administration Building. We had a magnificent view of Halifax harbour: we could see the convoys going out to sea on their way to Britain, with their decks laden with supplies and even vehicles, after their stay in Bedford Basin. Our job was to pay the ships' crews, and to take care of any problems the men had with their pay or allowances. Our office also paid the naval ratings on the Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships – these were the seamen who manned the guns on the merchant vessels. Many of these men lost their lives when their ships were torpedoed, and the pay writers had to close out their pay records. That was a sad task.

Security was always foremost in all our minds – in no way would we jeopardize the lives of our sailors as they crossed the ocean, escorting convoys through the dangerous seas and the U-boat menace. There was no talking about anything that happened on your job, or even where you were. When I was first posted to the pay office in Halifax, I was so security-conscious that I was afraid to even look for paper, in case I opened a cupboard I shouldn't! Security was stressed so much. In time I got over being that excessive, but I think that a real concern for security has stayed with me throughout my working years.

Just to show you what a big concern security was: one night, just before midnight, all the wrens were awakened and told to muster before the Commanding Officer. It seemed there was a spy scare: shortly before, a girl in uniform had come in hastily through the gate, refused to show her ID when challenged by the sentry, and just ran to the wren block. Our CO said that perhaps a spy in a wren uniform had infiltrated the camp; and if not, whoever it was must come forward immediately. But no one admitted to being that person, even after we were eventually dismissed and allowed to return to our rooms.

In the morning, though, all was made clear. One wren who was on all-night duty in the dockyard came back, and when she heard of the assembly she admitted to not stopping for the sentry. She explained that she was late going on duty, and just dashed back to her room before leaving by the north gate. So she knew nothing about the CO's order until the morning.

We wrens gradually became a cohesive unit, and on the weekends we pursued many interests. One Sunday a friend and I were allowed to go on a small harbour craft that took supplies to the various stations around Halifax harbour. We were issued heavy raincoats and sou'westers against the driving rain. The boat took us to Dartmouth Cove, Shearwater, Eastern Passage, McNabs Island, Georges Island and Point Pleasant Park before returning to the dockyard.

Before we were allowed to go ashore in the evenings or on weekends, we first had to be inspected by a Regulating Petty Officer. She would check that our shoes were shined, our ties were straight, our hats were at the proper angle, and our hair was neatly above our collars. Then we were dismissed and (as we used to say in the navy!) marched out in "liberty boats" to the Gottingen gate. Some took the streetcar downtown, others preferred to walk. There were always lineups to get into the few restaurants, or into a movie. There were no bridges then, so we travelled across the harbour by the Dartmouth Ferry. We often went to the Wanderer's Club beside the Halifax Commons, a favourite destination for naval personnel. We could always enjoy a cup of tea and a sandwich there, feeling at home in comfortable surroundings.

One day it was raining heavily as the girls came back into the wren quarters at Stadacona. Because of the rain, one girl's hair appeared quite long, down over her collar. The WRCNS officer inspecting us saw this, decided that it was unacceptable, and she just took a pair of scissors to the wren's hair! Chopping it off! Chunks of hair fell to the floor. The girl was in tears. When she went into her office the next day, people looked at her and asked, "What happened to you?" She told them about the officer cutting her hair, and they all agreed that that wasn't right. The matter was taken up to the CO, who also agreed that what the officer had done was not permissible. She was immediately sent away to another base.

Just before Christmas 1943, a small group of wrens was invited to a dance at an isolated signal station down the coast. We were put on a small vessel and went out of the harbour gates and around Chebucto Head and towards St. Margaret's Bay to a wharf, where we disembarked and were welcomed by these lonely sailors. We enjoyed the dance and refreshments, and for a time the sailors forgot their isolation as Christmas approached. What a thrill too for the wrens: except for this very special occasion, taking a trip out beyond the safety of the anti-submarine gates was out of the question.

In June 1944, a number of us had to leave Stadacona to be drafted to St. John's, Newfoundland. We boarded the *Port Townsend*, formerly a large ferry, with comfortable accommodations for our fairly large group of wrens. The first evening, the Officer in Charge asked if anyone had crossed the ocean before. I had, so I raised my hand. She asked if I'd been seasick, and I assured her that I had not. So she announced that I would be on duty that night, to patrol the passageways and make sure the wrens stayed asleep in their cabins (and not up on deck talking to the seamen!).

That was a long night for me, walking the ferry corridors while I worried about the U-boats lying in wait for ships leaving Halifax. At first we were part of a convoy of ships bound east for Britain; but after a few days, our ship left that convoy and changed direction northwards to join up with another convoy coming from Britain and headed for St. John's. But despite this protection, we could imagine what our sailors faced when they crossed and recrossed the Atlantic. Our accommodation was better, but the fear of encountering a U-boat was there for us too.

We arrived safely, the first large group of wrens in St. John's, and were put to work. My job was in the harbour pay office, looking after the various warships, corvettes and frigates that escorted convoys on the "Newfie-Derry" run across the Atlantic. I was also responsible for ships on the Triangle run, between St. John's, New York and Halifax. When a ship was due in port, I would calculate the amount due to each officer and rating and record it in the big pay ledger, which contained each man's pay and allowances. Then the paymaster and I would go aboard, the ship's company would muster on deck, and each sailor would step forward as his name was called to receive his pay packet. No one was allowed to go ashore until he was paid. I enjoyed this work – the sailors were always cheerful, relieved that their ship had arrived safely and that they had money in their pockets.

Generally the ships would lie alongside the jetty, one beside the other, three or four deep, and we just walked across them to reach the newly arrived one. But once there was no more jetty room available, and the ship we had to pay was anchored out in mid-harbour. The paymaster and I went out in a harbour craft, and I was dismayed to see that I had to carry the heavy pay ledger all the way up the rope "Jacob's ladder"! Somehow I managed to scramble up, despite the skirt I was wearing; and thankfully, a sailor took the ledger from me at the top.

Our Physical Training Instructors (PTIs) did a fine job of arranging outings as well as exercise for the wrens. We played many games of softball against the air force girls and the City Starettes, a civilian team. In fact, our team was declared the Newfoundland softball champion in 1944! The PTIs also organized a day at an RCN recreational centre, where sailors on shore leave could swim, fish, play games and relax before returning to sea. One officer and twenty-six wrens went for an outing there, cycling, paddling, swimming and hiking – with lots of good food served at tables outdoors. We worked hard at our jobs, so the relaxation was a most welcome change for us.

Another hot summer day in 1944, we were promised a fishing trip. We piled eagerly into the big open truck that was our usual mode of transportation, full of anticipation at the thought of casting our fishing rods into cool water. But we didn't know where the fishing locale was; the only person who did was our driver, a civilian with a great sense of humour. He let us off at the side of the road and told us to take our poles down a pathway he pointed to. Imagine our dismay when we discovered that he had left us at a fish hatchery – full of various sizes of fish for restocking lakes! We could only sit by the roadside and wait for the truck to return. You can imagine what we said to the driver when he eventually got back! But then he took us to a large lake not far away, and we had an enjoyable day's fishing.

We wrens wrote examinations to advance; and in March 1945 I qualified as a Petty Officer Wren Writer – and was given quarters in keeping with my new status. I had a cabin all to myself! But after living in a dormitory for so long, I found I really missed the camaraderie of the girls I had come to know so well.

V-E Day, May 7, 1945, was announced on the radio as we sat at our desks in the pay office. King George VI gave a victory speech, quite moving to us all; and afterwards the radio played *God Save The King* while we all stood to attention and sang the words. Then the staff formed a conga line and danced around and around the office! We were dismissed for the rest of the day. Some of us crossed the street to a nearby church to give thanks that the war was over, and that no more lives need be lost.

When we arrived back at Avalon, it was announced that all personnel were confined to barracks. But that was no hardship: dances were held in the gymnasium three nights running! This was very well received, and our boisterous spirits and pent-up energy were allowed full rein. Everyone simply wanted to celebrate.

Less than a month later, we had another thrill: Frank Sinatra came to entertain us. He had gone to Halifax as part of a tour, and was asked if he would be going on to St. John's. He hadn't planned to; but when he heard there were some 5,000 armed forces personnel serving there, he changed his plans.

So on June 5, 1945, he brought his troupe over to perform in our drill hall, which had been set up for a most appreciative audience. Frank sang his special songs (accompanied by Phil Silvers, who later starred on TV as Sergeant Bilko) and was an immediate hit with all the young service people. So much, in fact, that some daring sailor looking for a souvenir made off with Sinatra's trademark trilby hat, which he always wore. Sinatra protested vigorously, and everyone was confined to barracks. Before long, much to everyone's relief, someone owned up and the hat was returned.

The navy still had a surplus of small arms and ammunition in St. John's to dispose of. Some of us wrens were invited to sail out to sea on the naval vessels, a good distance from land, and help the men to throw all those items overboard. As we watched them sink into the Atlantic, we realized then that the war was really over.

With the end of the war, ships were no longer needed to escort convoys across the ocean, and fewer pay writers were needed in St. John's. In July 1945 I was sent to Sydney, Nova Scotia, where sailors were being demobilized. We gathered together all their pay records and advances, and the men were given train tickets to their home towns. There was much paperwork to be done, and of course everyone wanted to go home immediately. But gradually, all the sailors were sent to their home bases and released from the navy to begin their lives anew. It was very satisfying to us to see them homeward bound.

In November 1945, I was posted to HMCS Queen's in Regina. There were still people needing their paperwork finalized, but the pace was not as intense and the base was quickly closing down. I stayed on until February 1946. Then I was offered a civilian job, and knew it was time to leave.

The wrens served just a few years, but in that time we learned so much about working together for the good of the service. We came in as individuals concerned with our own well-being; but we soon became a community, working towards a common goal of supporting the navy's war effort.

Mabel Anne 'Nan' Beck –
née Morriss

I was born in Kingston, Ontario, and lived there with my parents in 1939. Before the war broke out, we were glued to the radio at news time. When I heard the announcement of the declaration of war, over the loudspeaker of a car going down the street, I was excited. That's how the young people reacted: we were excited by something different happening. I thought I knew about the horror of war, though I didn't really – I hadn't seen it, but I had heard stories from the First World War (and they bothered me to death). I don't think anyone can really depict how horrible it is to be on the front lines. I'd seen some movies about the First World War, such as *All Quiet on the Western Front.* We thought the movie was fairly realistic, but then we weren't there!

My father had been in the first war, but he didn't talk much about it. We gathered that it had been really horrible at the front. In this war, although he was over the age limit, he also managed to enlist in RCASC – because he could cook, and they were desperate for cooks. As the war continued, they became less picky about who they allowed to join up.

As far as we were concerned, the only difference in high school after the war broke out was that the older boys would leave to go to war. It was the thing to do. So many boys had already gone; you hardly saw an able-bodied man on the street who wasn't in uniform. All my male school friends were in the services, and my brother had already joined the air force. A lot of the boys on my street who chummed around with my brother went to war – and many never came back. It was really sad. My son has all sorts of friends he went to school with, and we don't have any.

Some of the teachers left to join the services as well. I continued in high school for the remainder of that year; then the following year, after

Christmas, I stopped going and went off to work. We girls had been advised to stay in school, but we couldn't resist the lure of making money. This was not a good idea, we realized later – we should have stayed in school.

But I just went off and applied for a job with the Aluminium Company of Canada. All the factories were desperate for people, because the men were leaving, and they would advertise in the paper for workers. I don't remember having to take a test to get my job in the factory; they would hire you if you were sixteen or over. Some people had really dirty jobs, but they didn't offer me one of those – I worked as an inspector. Maybe it depended on your education. You were paid according to your responsibility, not according to how hard you worked. We made 28 cents an hour to start with and when I worked my way up to Unit Leader, I made 75 cents an hour.

Every able-bodied person was working then. The war was a great opportunity for women to get out of the house, if they didn't have small children to look after. You have to remember that we had just gone through the depression, and nobody had two cents to rub together. When I was growing up, we didn't have the social services that we do now. There was something called "relief", which was similar to welfare except that a man on relief had to work for the city, cleaning the streets or shovelling snow. You got very little money; I had a friend whose family was on relief, and they only got 2 dollars a week. (They also got vouchers for the clothing and grocery store; so when rationing came during the war, some people were used to the voucher system.) At school, you could always tell which kids were on relief because they always had the same shoes and the same dresses – though I don't think I realized that until I was older.

Kingston had originally been founded as a military city; but back then it was basically retired farmers, superannuated ministers and professors from Queen's University. People studying medicine there could finish their degrees, but then they had to serve for three years. (After the war, though, veterans could go to university at government expense – including women.)

There were many farms in the Kingston area: mostly small mixed farms with grain, berries, orchards and gardens, and chickens, pigs and cows – they sold eggs, milk and butter. Everybody had a little bit of everything, and they sold things at the market and on roadside stands. As well, lots of the farmers would come into town to work at the war plant. I knew one couple who would both come in during the week while her parents babysat. (Farmers had no money then, and they didn't have tons of land and equipment – but they had no huge debts like today either.)

And since they helped provide the food, some of the farm boys could stay instead of going to the war. Even when they brought in conscription, after a few years of war, and every man over a certain age would be called up – they still needed the farmers, because we needed food.

There were at least a hundred people working in the Aluminium Company factory. Eventually it was kept going twenty-four hours. It made large aluminium sheets, pipes and some extrusions, which looked like curtain rods. Some of this material was to go into airplanes, and everybody took safety very seriously. The first thing you saw at the plant was a great big wreck of an airplane. It was there to remind us to be very careful: lives were at stake if we let something go through that wasn't safe.

I enjoyed working there. I was in the inspection stage, which was second to last – next to the shipping department. We tested everything, outside and inside. We would shine a light through these tubes, looking for pits or tears, anything that would make it unsafe. We'd sometimes cut off a piece to take a better look at it. Anything we thought was bad went onto the reject pile. (The rejects got recycled in our huge smelter, where they were melted down into ingots the size of a brick. Some factories also collected gold and silver to be melted down, for whatever purpose – a lot of people would give their jewellery.)

We had rationing, but it didn't bother me – because I wasn't the one keeping house! I lived at home, and would just give my mother my coupons. The only thing she found difficult to get was tea: she was from England, and a great tea drinker. Meat was difficult too, though we were fortunate because we liked a lot of meats that many people didn't – liver and heart, for instance. They weren't rationed, so we could always have some meat. The rationing was really quite good, not nearly as severe as in Britain. Europe was much worse and as the war went on, the people in Europe were starving.

While working at the plant I met Alfred Beck, and we decided to get married. As I was only seventeen, we needed to get written permission from my father, who was away with the army in Petawawa. I stayed at home after we were married because there was no point in moving out; my husband-to-be was stationed in Debert, Nova Scotia. He managed to get home for our wedding in June, though! I was still working then, but I went out east for a month so that we could be together.

Alf lived in camp, and would come over every evening to where I was boarding. (Debert wasn't a permanent base, just a training camp and dispersal point, so there were no married quarters there.) Then in late September, my new husband was sent overseas to England, and I returned home on the train and went back to work at the aluminium plant.

In 1944, tired of not seeing my husband, I quit the plant and joined the services too. He'd been staying with my aunt in England on his leaves and I thought that if could go overseas, I could visit my aunt – and maybe I'd be able to see him too.

But I didn't realize until after I'd joined CWAC that you weren't allowed to go overseas if you were under twenty-one. So I didn't get to go after all - I could have stayed right where I was, and made lots of money! You don't make much money in the army: only 90 cents a day to start with.

The MD No. 3 recruiting office in Kingston wanted me to get permission from my husband first. Well, I didn't. I thought to myself, I'm not going to ask my husband, that's ridiculous. If I want to go in, then

I'm going to. I was sure that if he knew why I was joining up, that would be fine with him. I didn't even discuss my decision to enlist with my family. I was very independent. Mother never said anything, though I think she was a bit upset because it meant she would be living alone. But she understood.

I also had to be independent of my friends – none of them went with me to enlist. We had stopped chumming together when I got married. All my chums were still in school, and when a bunch of boys and girls would go out together I felt like the fifth wheel on the wagon, because I was married.

At that time, the army medicals were still very picky – they wouldn't accept you if you had asthma or anything. The first time my husband tried to join up, they wouldn't take him because of his eyes – he had astigmatism. But that was when the war first started; a couple of years later, they took him right away. As they got more desperate for people, they were more flexible. It was the same for the girls – though I think you still weren't allowed to join if you had children.

There was also an aptitude test, which wasn't very difficult. The male instructor once asked me why I thought women did better on the exam. Well, one of the questions was: "How do you take this lumber and make things with it with the fewest cuts" I told him that it was probably because we knew how to sew, and were experienced at being efficient and trying to do more with less. I always moved the material around so there wasn't much waste, and saved my scraps.

After waiting the mandatory thirty days, I got a letter saying that I was accepted. I went to a large home in Kingston, a big mansion. There must have been about thirty of us, waiting for our army uniforms, taking our medicals, sewing on our badges and so on. There were different girls from all over staying there, and you just sort of gravitated toward ones who were similar to you. How people socialized depended on how they were brought up. Some were more educated, some were more chummy, and some were free spirits! They would climb through the windows and sneak out after bedtime to go for coffee. (If they got caught, they were punished by doing dishes or something. Our officers there were all women – the military authorities had learned early on that it was best to have male officers over the men, and female officers over the women. They found that when male officers disciplined the women, they were too lenient!)

Then we were all sent to Kitchener for basic training: drills, military law, ranks, who you saluted and who you didn't. We also had map reading and orienteering. I had a wonderful time – I loved it. We would be hiding in the bush, crawling through ditches wearing our camouflage gear and tin hats, trying to find the other team first.

One reason I really enjoyed it was because I didn't care what I looked like. I got my hair cut really short, and had a ball. Some of the girls were trying to be glamorous, and were afraid they would break a fingernail or muck up their hair. You had to have your hair off the collar, anyway. I was used to this as back at the factory we were working with machinery, so everybody had to keep their hair tied up. You couldn't have any hair showing at all.

One thing we did in basic training was to learn to take a Bren gun apart and put it back together in so many seconds. I don't remember what my time was, but I passed. I never shot a gun, though, because they needed all the ammo for overseas. At one time, my husband was guarding an ammo depot in England with an empty gun!

We were also sent into roundhouses filled with gas, to prove that our gas masks worked. We had to run around inside with our gas masks on – then take them off and do it again. We got out of there pretty quickly! It was a good experience, though: all the telling in the world wouldn't prove to you that the masks worked. It wasn't anything terrible, though it may have been bad for you if you were prone to asthma or allergies. But then you probably wouldn't be in the army.

For me, basic training was like my idea of boarding school. There were always three companies at a time in our camp for their six-week training: the first group (week one and two), then the girls in the next class for weeks three and four, and then the graduating class doing weeks five and six. It was a rotation. Kitchener was an all-female camp; the men from our area were given their basic training in Petawawa. (There were a few men on our base, though – either "conscientious objectors," or men who had returned from overseas because they were ill. One had tuberculosis. They worked as truck drivers, kitchen help or groundskeepers.)

We women were mostly in our twenties and thirties, of all colours. Many were aboriginal: there were quite a few natives fighting for Canada. (Before I joined the army, I had only ever seen one black person in my life, the elderly man who looked after the stadium at Queen's University.) At one point, after Poland had been overrun, we received a company of Polish girls. They had their own uniforms, and we weren't allowed to mix with them. I don't know why – of course, we couldn't speak Polish to start with! But I don't remember them ever coming to our canteen.

The Canadian army was always mixed, but there was never any trouble. I think everyone got along. But some civilians still showed blatant prejudice – something that you don't see in Canada now. I remember walking into town once and seeing a sign in a restaurant window saying, "Select Clientele Only." I don't know whether that referred to black people or Jewish people, but that was still going on then. The Americans had separate outfits for their coloured men. But for the Canadian Army, people were always people.

Basic training lasted six weeks, and then we were posted all over Canada. But I was kept on staff in Kitchener: I think perhaps because I had no high-school qualification, and I was married. They wanted me to go into the sewing room and work on alterations, but I didn't want to. They asked me to go into the kitchen, but I didn't want to do that either! Then they let me work in the Quartermaster's stores, dealing with barracks furniture and equipment. I fitted shoes and all sorts of things.

When you joined the army, you were issued everything but underwear. But there were strict rules about the length of your uniform skirt: you couldn't shorten it or lengthen it. They all had to be the same distance from the ground, so that it looked good when we were all lined up on parade. So the short girls had longer skirts, and the tall girls had shorter skirts. Drivers were issued slacks, and leather boots – we lucky people from QM stores got them too, as a perk. I often wished I had brought more things home: those shoes and boots were beautiful, the best.

Every so often, QM would inspect everyone's kit to make sure that everything was tidy, and that nothing was lost or in disrepair. You had to lay everything out on your bed in a certain way, and it all had to be clean and organized. When it was just QM stores doing the inspection, nobody was worried, because we just wanted to know that you had everything. But when the officers did it, they wanted to make sure that everything was perfect – so the soldiers were nervous! I had no trouble there; my dad was in the British navy, so I knew to have everything just so.

I spent a lot of my time doing paperwork. I kept the inventory, and visited buildings to inspect and count the furniture. Furniture often needed to be fixed. There were always shoes to be mended as well: we all had only two pairs. Once a week a truck went to London for the day, to drop off the shoes to be mended and pick up the repaired ones. There was no excuse for thin soles, and it could be dangerous. Sometimes when we were on parade, one of the lady officers would pick people at random, go behind you and ask you to lift up your foot. Then she would ask, "May I touch you?" – and crack the bottom of your shoe with her swagger stick. If your sole was too thin, you could really feel your foot smart.

Women worked driving trucks; as hairdressers; as office and tuck-shop staff; and as "Provos" – they were the military police on base. There were also female medical attendants, orderlies, nurses and doctors. We had two female doctors: one was in the camp hospital, which had about twenty beds, and the other was in the Medical Inspection Room, our clinic. It was very insulting to go to the MIR, because you were always tested for pregnancy. Imagine going there for a cold, and being tested to see if you were pregnant! But since we weren't supposed to self-medicate, we had no choice but to go there.

Our training centre was very up to date. We lived in an H-hut, with an ablution's room, and we had sheets, blankets and pillowcases. We had steam heat, not the old pot-bellied stoves. The meals at the camp were excellent, although there was no liquor in our canteen – only sergeants and above were allowed to drink.

When we went home on leave, we were issued a food ration card so that we wouldn't be taking away from someone else's rations. Because of rationing, food was important to all of us. My husband in England also had a ration card, to use when he went on leave. I used to send him parcels of food once a month. They went by air-mail, and got there fast – so fast that I once sent him some eggs, since I knew they didn't get many over there. I bought six of the freshest eggs I could find, and wrapped them in a package of All-Bran – I thought that if they broke, then at least he could make muffins! But they all got there safely.

We were often ingenious in our packaging. One of our officers had a sister overseas, and we would sometimes help our Captain to ship a bottle of whisky over to her. We sent it well wrapped up, in a hollowed-out loaf of bread. That way, if the bottle happened to break, the bread would soak up the alcohol. As well, the bread helped to camouflage the whisky, so no one was tempted to drink it before it arrived at its destination!

Mail was often an intermittent thing. Our Commanding Officer in Kitchener was Major Daisy Royal (who later became a colonel). Her husband, who was overseas as a war correspondent, was stationed near mine in Europe. Sometimes she would drop by the QM Stores and tell me that there was mail for us. We would often go weeks without it, and then suddenly there would be mail.

There was a fire brigade at the Kitchener camp too, and we were all supposed to take our turn at fire picket duty. You were on duty for 24 hours, from 4 p.m. to 4 p.m. the next day. You couldn't go out that day. You could continue your usual duties, and you didn't have to be awake all the time; but if there were a fire, you would take your assigned place on the fire truck. Mainly we looked after the hoses and ladders, and kept prepared.

Luckily, there never was a fire while I was there; but we had fire drills every now and again, especially at 5 a.m. You had to get out of the huts immediately, get in line and wait until they counted everybody. In the middle of winter, you can imagine all us girls standing there in our big overshoes and greatcoats, with our curlers still in our hair! It was really funny to see.

We cheated a bit with the fire duty roster: I took some of the girls' duty nights for them. They would report for duty; and then after that I would go on duty for them, and they would go into town and visit with their sweethearts or husbands, usually at the hotel. (Luckily, we were never caught!) I didn't mind filling in, since my husband was away – and I didn't see why the girls should have to go on duty when their boyfriends wanted to visit. Women were allowed to visit anyone in town, male or female, though we couldn't stay there overnight. (But we couldn't bring visitors into the camp, ever.)

For entertainment, if we had free time, we would go to a show or out for supper – although our food in camp was wonderful! And there were often Saturday night dances in Kitchener, the old-fashioned European-style dances. But going into town wasn't always pleasant: some men would block your way and push you into the street, forcing you to walk in the gutters. I think their reason was that some girls in the service didn't have a very good name. Some people really looked down on them. But I don't think that service girls were any bit different than other girls: there were nice ones, and there were ones that weren't nice. And the men in the military didn't treat us like that. Everyone was treated the same.

When the war in Europe ended I was in Brockville, fitting out a draft of women who were going overseas. The news of the end of the war came through the military first, and then was announced over the radio. We had just finished wrapping one of those bottles of whisky for the Captain's sister; so we broke open the loaf of bread and drank the whisky!

As soon as the war in Europe was over, I decided to get out. I felt badly afterwards as they were still asking for volunteers for the Japanese war.

I always felt I was looked down on for not staying in. But I thought, well, my husband will be coming back from Europe soon, and I don't want to be off somewhere. Little did I know that he had volunteered to go!

So when I left the army, I stayed with my parents until my husband came home – the war against Japan was finally over in August. We rented an apartment for a while, then decided to build a house with the money we had from our war grants. At that time, just after the war, houses and apartments were in such short supply that you couldn't get a loan to buy an existing house – you had to build a new one. I think this was partly because nobody built houses during the war, since you couldn't get the building materials and supplies; and partly because so many men got married during the war, then came home and wanted to move out of their parents' homes into homes of their own.

As well, I bought a washing machine and a baby carriage (our two sons arrived quickly), and my husband bought an old car that never did work! You couldn't buy a new car then. The only ones who could were doctors and ministers, because they had to travel a lot.

I think that after the war, we all had more hope for the future. Gradually, rationing was repealed – food and goods slowly became more plentiful, now that they were no longer needed for the troops. We all expected to be well-off and have a new car. But that didn't happen – at least, for some people it did, but some had it really tough.

There was less employment than before the war as well, because all the men were getting out of the service, going back home and looking for work. At first there were quite a few jobs, but after that there weren't. Of course the employers got picky: if you weren't a good employee, they would find someone who worked better. And a lot of the women lost their jobs because the men were coming home. The single girls found it especially difficult. Now that it wasn't making things for the war any more, the Aluminium Company of Canada started making things like siding and windows for houses.

I wouldn't have missed my wartime experience for anything. The thing that sticks out most in my mind is the camaraderie – that was really nice. But unfortunately, I didn't keep in touch with any of the girls. A couple of times I would see a lady I recognized from the base, but I always seemed to be in a hurry with family or something. I only ever attended one CWAC reunion, a dinner in Ottawa, held at Lansdowne Park in the late 1940s. The only person I recognized there was the Colonel, Daisy Royal!

I think having women in the military is fine – though I don't know how things work when men and women are so mixed nowadays. We were separated during the war, and that was fine. But now, women are taking on more active jobs. Mind you, women did a lot of active jobs during the war too: they were machine gunners, and delivered bombers. There were even girls in Italy who got pinned down, and had to fight their way out of it.

Norma J. Mosher –
née Millett

I was thirteen and living in Halifax when the Second World War broke out. When I was fifteen, I joined a group of girls called the Air Cadettes – no connection to the Air Cadets of today. This was a junior version of a women's volunteer Flying Squadron group that had been started before the war, I believe, by a female pilot named Melda Walters. She flew out of the old airport on Chebucto Road.

I remember being at that airport at least once; but most of our weekly meetings were held in St. Paul's Church Hall – in the evenings, because we were still in school then. There were probably thirty or forty teenaged girls in the group. Each meeting, we would have drill and spend part of the evening in some activity. We completed a First Aid Course and learned to recognize different planes by making model airplanes. Other than Melda, the founder of the group, our instructors were mostly members of the female Flying Squadron. As we became more proficient in the many things we were learning, we were promoted to different ranks. When I finished, my rank in the group was Wing Commander – the highest rank the Cadettes had. I was the only one.

It was all very serious, and I don't recall that we ever did anything of a social nature. We were in at least one parade that I can remember: I was sure one of us would slip on the cobblestones (now long gone) as we marched down Cogswell Street. Our uniforms were one-piece dresses of Air Force blue, with lighter blue ties and wedge caps to match. We wore them proudly!

Perhaps my greatest moment in the Air Cadettes happened one day in Dartmouth, when I was saluted by two airmen. It was such an event for me! But I can imagine how embarrassed those two young men would have been if they knew they'd saluted a teenaged "Wing Commander" of a volunteer group.

Some members of the Flying Squadron left to join the air force; and I believe that a couple of Cadettes also joined up, when they were older. Looking back, though, I don't think I considered that I was either helping the war effort or being a volunteer. To a teenager, it was more like doing things that needed to be done – which I enjoyed doing.

Because of the first aid training in the Cadettes, I volunteered to work at a First Aid Post. All the other workers were adults, and we were very well organized, each with a job to do. While we were at the post, which was located in a house basement, we would practise the tasks we might have to carry out in a real air raid. And whenever there was a practice air raid, the warning sirens would wail, the city would be blacked out, and I would go off wearing my helmet, with my gas mask hanging over my shoulder, and walk at least a mile and a half in complete darkness to my first aid post. I shudder now when I think of it; and can just imagine a mother allowing her fifteen-year-old daughter to do that today!

"Y" Depot in Halifax was an air force base where airmen were posted to await being sent overseas – not just RCAF crew but Australians and New Zealanders as well. They had received their training and were ready for overseas duty. There were usually weekly dances held for these servicemen, but if the base was full they would be held more often. At first, I was only permitted to attend these dances if an older airman, a friend of the family, escorted me there and home again. He would see me to the door of the Recreation Hall, then meet me there and walk me home again after the dance.

Occasionally, my girlfriends and I would go to dances in the Officers' Mess – but they never seemed to have as good a time as the enlisted men. The airmen usually only stayed at "Y" Depot for a short time; but occasionally some would stay for several weeks, and we would get to know a few of them. I can still vividly recall walking home from one of the dances and seeing dozens of these men marching to the ship that would take them overseas. We knew we would have danced with some of them, and the horrible sadness of war was with us that night – we were unable to answer the worrisome questions about whether their ships would reach England safely, who would survive the war, how many would return home. It was then that we really knew what war was all about.

When I completed high school, I took a business course and worked as a book-keeper at the jewellery firm Henry Birks & Sons. One day a middle-aged woman named Hilda McNeil, who worked as a clerk in the store, invited me to go with her to the Free French hostel. Dances were held there whenever a Free French vessel was in port, with the officers and enlisted men entertained together. Going to these dances became a regular habit. Of course I couldn't speak French, and most of the French sailors couldn't speak English; but dancing was the same in both countries. The French sailors liked to tango and were good at it. It's odd, the things one remembers after so long a time: I recall one rather large sailor helping in the kitchen, up to his elbows mixing a salad!

One evening, one of the French officers invited me to have dinner on board his ship, the *Lobelia*.

This was not altogether to my mother's liking! I was only allowed to go if I could take a friend. This was quite an event for two teenagers. We had dinner in the Officers' Wardroom, and were quite surprised to find ourselves eating a very plain meal – we were obviously forgetting that this was wartime. We saw very little of the ship, either. The officer gave me a blue enamelled pin with the name of the ship on it, which I still have.

Miss McNeil also took me along one night to the YMCA hostel – she played the piano in the canteen to entertain the servicemen. (Occasionally, a serviceman would sit down at the piano himself and play all evening.) I often found myself behind the counter, doling out coffee and sandwiches; but soon began to take my turn frying dozens and dozens of eggs an evening. I also remember making egg salad filling for sandwiches in an enormous pot (using milk to mix the filling instead of mayonnaise, probably because it was unavailable or too expensive). I can't remember what other kinds of sandwiches we made, but I'll never forget all those eggs – boiled or fried!

Through some of the women at the YMCA, I started working one night a week at the Legion Canteen with groups of women from the Independent Order of Daughters of the Empire (IODE). This canteen was smaller, only served lunches and had no music. The work was much the same – making and serving lunches – and while it wasn't hard work, it could be tiring.

One night, a young sailor asked for scrambled eggs rather than fried eggs. Much to my delight, I was the only one on that shift who knew how to scramble eggs. I went home that night feeling very pleased with myself – obviously my middle-aged co-workers had hired help at home to do such mundane chores as scrambling eggs!

Towards the end of the war, when I was about nineteen, a French officer I met at the Free French hostel invited me to a dance at the Admiralty House – the only time I was there. Some time later, I read a long article in the newspaper about his experiences with the French Resistance – apparently he was considered somewhat of a hero by the French navy.

When V-E Day came, anyone living in Halifax at that time will remember the riots that broke out. All was calm where I was working at the YMCA that night; but a few blocks away, the navy and other servicemen were rioting in the city's business district. We knew nothing about it; but the hostel manager received a frantic phone call from my mother, and drove me home when my shift was over. It was only when I went to work at Birks the next morning that I saw the damage that had been done downtown. Our store was one of those that had been demolished and looted: the main floor was completely destroyed, glass broken, showcases in shambles, and much of the merchandise missing.

One never got to know any of these servicemen – most of them you would only see once or twice. If you were working at the canteen counters, you were generally too busy to talk for more than a few minutes; most times, not even that. At the dances, you might meet an airman a few times; but again, although you might exchange names or they might see you home after the dance, it couldn't go any further. They were confined to their posts, so as to be ready to leave on short notice.

It is interesting how one's life turns out. I eventually married a couple of years after the war. My husband was an RCAF Flying Officer, but he had never been at "Y" Depot – he went overseas from New York. He and one of my sons had a great love of making and flying model planes – on a giant scale now, and flown by remote control, but I could still remember the basic shapes and help them to cut out strips of balsa wood. I often recalled my dancing days at "Y" Depot too.

Now that I'm a widow, I spend most of my time doing volunteer work – and only now realize what an early start I had with the Cadettes. One of the groups that keeps me most busy is IODE – I am now a provincial treasurer. I found out later that one of the women I had worked with at the hostel had been a provincial president of the group.

Eva Konopacki

In September 1939 the German army, at Hitler's bidding, hit Poland with all its might – changing the course of history not only in Europe, but in the whole world. In Nowy Sacz, the convent high school became a hospital – which meant a prolonged vacation for all us school children. The grim fact that the hospital would be filled with casualties somehow didn't sink into my mind. I plastered long strips of newspaper to the window panes, to protect them from breaking in case of bombardment. For me at thirteen, the war seemed an exciting adventure.

When our school became a hospital, my mother Anna decided to travel to Eastern Poland. She hoped that the schools at the other end of the country would stay open and continue teaching. She thought that in the east, everything would be peaceful. But on the journey we had our first taste of war: our train was bombed and strafed a number of times. People were killed and wounded. My concept of war as an adventure was changing rapidly.

But when we reached the convent school at Jazlowiec, near Kowel, close to the Soviet border, everything there did seem calm. Poland had a peace treaty with the Soviets, and no danger was expected from that side. But what did we know about politics? The fate of Poland was already sealed by the secret treaty between Hitler and Stalin, tearing Poland in two and sharing the spoils between them. While the Polish Army was in a deadly struggle with German armoured troops, the Soviet army would begin crossing Poland's eastern border under the false pretence of bringing help against the Germans.

When we arrived at the Jazlowiec school, it was already filled with refugees. The nuns did their best to feed everyone. I still remember the large park around the convent, with walnut trees covered with fresh crops of nuts. For the first time in my life I ate walnuts fresh from the tree. They were delicious.

Three days later, early in the morning, I heard voices singing a strange song. My mother woke up too and listened. "Only Russians sing like that – that's a Russian song," she said in disbelief. That was the day the Soviet army entered Poland.

The new authorities closed the convent, and the nuns and refugees had to disperse. We went to Lvov, the largest city in Eastern Poland. Lvov, "the city of the lion," was built by the Polish monarchs, aristocracy and rich merchants, and was known for its beauty and fine architecture. Again we found refuge in a convent, the Contemplative Order of St. Claire on Kurkowa Street. The ascetic life of the nuns, normally spent praying day and night, was now dedicated to caring for the refugees. We crowded into their cells and corridors by the hundreds, and they fed us homemade soup once a day.

In January 1940, my mother decided to cross the Polish-Romanian border to reach my father. As far back as I could remember, my parents' lives had gone separate ways, although my father provided for me and often wrote to me. But now we were at war, and my mother decided to seek his help. Romania was still a free country, and my father held an important position as a chargé d'affaires at the Polish Embassy in Bucharest.

The Polish border with Romania was guarded by the Soviets, but local farmers would guide groups of people across secretly for a price. This illegal crossing was called "the green border." Many young men crossed to join the Allied Forces in the West. My mother made the arrangements; and on the appointed day, she and I took a train from Lvov to Sniatyn, a border town. There were only a few people on the train, mainly local peasants in their country garb, and I felt uncomfortably conspicuous wearing my navy blue winter coat with the school emblem on the sleeve.

We arrived in Sniatyn late at night and travelled by sleigh through the snow to a little farm house, where we stayed until the time arranged for our crossing. Two men were to cross the border with us. One was a short middle-aged university professor from Poznan, called Maricz; the other a tall and burly Polish army colonel called Jampolski.

The night of our crossing was very dark and cold, with no moon. We walked across the fields in single file, in complete silence. The snow crackled under our feet and our breath formed white clouds above our heads. After a long march, we were so close to the border that we could see the lights from the Romanian train station. All we had to do now was cross a wooded area and then the frozen River Dniestr. I thought of the surprise my father would get when we arrived. He was always loving, trying to make up for not being with me. He came to see me as often as he could, wrote long letters, and sent me picture books from the countries he visited.

But the moment we were among the trees, my reverie was broken by loud shouts in Russian: "*Ruki na vierh!* – hands up!" At once we were surrounded by the white silhouettes of armed Soviet border guards, who had been hiding behind the trees. Their long white fur coats made them practically invisible. (We later found that this was a trap, arranged in advance by our guide.)

Everybody put their hands up, and I did the same. My mother and I were on one side of a small clearing, away from the men. Seeing us standing there, one of the Russian soldiers shouted, "Turn around! "At that moment, I was sure that he was going to shoot us. But nothing happened to us then.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw one of the guards viciously kicking the Colonel and hitting him with the rifle butt.

Then we were led to the guard house, and everybody but me was interrogated all night. I was told that as a child, all I had to do was sit quietly. An armed guard accompanied me to the washroom.

Next morning, we were put on the train with guards and taken to the old prison in Kolomyja. In the prison, we were led through long corridors. Suddenly we were told to stop and face the wall: the guards wanted to prevent us from seeing another group of prisoners that was coming. Still, I managed to turn my head slightly and look. What I saw hurt my heart: thin bearded men wearing Polish uniforms – with heavy irons on their hands and legs.

We were taken to a large hall to wait until we were assigned to cells. The walls were all covered with scribbled messages: "We are taken to the gulag in the Soviet Union, please notify our family." "The transport is leaving tomorrow, destination unknown." There were hundreds of names and addresses. We found out later that most of the prisoners were Polish officers, judges, teachers and community leaders.

The conditions in the Kolomyja prison were terrible. The cells were overcrowded; and instead of toilets, we only had large buckets. (Many prisoners suffered from diarrhea, and had to use the buckets quite often – which caused some nasty remarks.) On our first day, everybody was taken to the showers. We had to remove all our clothing and stand naked while the male guards distributed small pieces of hard, sandy soap. It was February and there was no heating in the prison; the shower water was freezing cold. Afterwards we had to wait, shivering, for our clothing to be returned: it had been taken for delousing. We protested, saying that our clothing was clean, but the regulations demanded every garment be cleaned. When we finally got our clothing back we found a few stunned lice inside, which had come from other prisoners' garb.

After only three days in Kolomyja, we were taken by train to Stanislavov, a much bigger city. The prison there had been built before the war to house criminals; now, the Soviets used it for political prisoners. The large prison was eight stories high and rectangular in shape, with a big covered courtyard in the centre. All the cells faced the courtyard, and all doors had a viewer for the guard to watch the prisoners.

Our fourth-floor cell, like the others, had only one bed – but there were seven women in the cell. One occupied the bed, the others sat or lay across the floor with their feet under the bed. We soon realized that all the women were the wives of Polish officers, except for the one on the bed. She, we were told in a whisper, was a petty thief acting as an informer for the police. We were glad to have her at a distance, because she was covered with lice.

Those who slept on the floor stayed as far as possible from the leaking toilet at the end of the cell. The electric bulb was lit all night. We were so crowded that during the night everybody had to turn over at the same time – though the advantage was that this kept us warm. The prison was not heated, and the glass in the little window close to the ceiling was broken. My mother, who liked fresh air, slept under the window. I was next to her. We wore our winter coats all the time, except for the few minutes each morning when we removed all our clothing to check for lice.

During the day, the women tried to forget the present by talking about their families and their normal lives before the war. One young woman hoped, foolishly, that she would be released soon: after all, she hadn't done anything wrong. None of us could guess that Stalin had ordered the total destruction of the Polish upper class – not just officers and their wives and families, but thousands of policemen, judges, intellectuals, businessmen, or anyone with an education who held a civil or religious position. Although these people had never fought against the Soviets, they were all accused of espionage. A year later, 25,000 Poles would be shot and buried in mass graves.

Our breakfast consisted of a cup of hot brown liquid and a thick slice of bread. At noon we had a bowl of thin soup; and for supper, some more brew. The only advantage of drinking this was that it was hot. From the bread, which had the consistency of clay, my mother made three small balls and taught me how to juggle. The most popular topic of conversation was food. Everybody talked about what they would like to eat, and how to prepare delicious dishes. My dream was to eat a piece of buttered white bread with a thick slice of ham.

During the day we sat on the floor, and at night we slept in the same place. One day we were told that those who wished could take a walk. My mother and I, and a couple of other women, decided to stretch our legs. We were taken to the courtyard. There were prison buildings on three sides, and on the fourth was a two-storey brick wall with barbed wire on top. We had to walk around the courtyard in single file, our hands behind our backs. We looked exactly like Van Gogh's painting *Prison Court.* Although the walk lasted only 15 minutes. I was frozen nearly to death and never volunteered again.

At night, interrogations were held. Being under age I was never interrogated, but my mother was taken several times: like everybody else, she was accused of espionage. At one interrogation, after we had been at Stanislavov for three weeks, she was told that she would be moved to Kiev prison in the Soviet Union. Now she had to decide about my future. She was told that she had two choices: I could be placed in an Soviet orphanage, or sent to relatives. To save me from the orphanage, my mother told the KGB that we had relatives in Lvov. In fact, they were only acquaintances.

Parting was heart-breaking for both of us, but especially for my mother, who had to stay in prison and send away her only child to an uncertain future. We didn't know if we would ever see each other again. After short goodbyes, KGB agents drove me to the train station and put me on a train going to Lvov, with a transport of Russian soldiers. Soldiers absorbed in a card game didn't pay any attention to a pale thirteen-year-old; and as soon as we reached the suburbs of Lvov I slipped off the train, afraid that somebody might try to stop me.

Full of anxiety, I knocked on the door of our casual friends, whom I had met only once before. But I needn't have worried: they received me very kindly. Mrs. Szwabowicz was an elderly widow whose three grown daughters lived with her. Even though the times were hard and they didn't have much, they still took me in. (A month later, they took in another refugee girl.)

First of all, their maid Mary gave me a thorough bath and washed my hair with a special soap to kill the lice. Then, for the first time in many weeks, I slept in a bed with clean sheets. It was a wonderful feeling. But a few days later, I developed a high fever and became very ill. Mrs. Szwabowicz called the doctor. I was too weak to ask what was wrong with me, and never did find out. It took me a full month to recover.

After my sufferings in prison, normal life was wonderful to me – I was even grateful to be back at school! Because of the war, I had lost a year; now I was to pick up at the Grade Eight level. Our coed school was still called Stefan Batory, the name of the powerful king who had ruled Poland in the sixteenth century. The Communists dictated the curriculum: as well as mathematics, history, geography and literature, we also studied Russian, Ukrainian and the history of Marxism. (Religion wasn't part of the school program, but was secretly taught by the Dominican Friars at a nearby church.) I made my way to the top of the class – competing fiercely with another student, Stan. We liked each other, although his father was a Communist. As head girl of our class, I organized tutoring for students who were behind with their school work. Stan too often stayed after school to help other students.

Twice a week we had gymnastics lessons, accompanied by piano music. The piano was played by a striking-looking woman: young, with luminous dark eyes, short black hair and a pale complexion. She never used any makeup and was always dressed in black. I still remember her sweet gentle smile. Her name was Fulla Horak, and she would often play the piano after school just for pleasure. I stayed and listened; and one day she asked if I would like to take piano lessons. I explained that I had only just started lessons before the war, and was still a beginner She said she would give me free lessons if I wanted.

Soon she became my teacher and my best friend. I often went to the other end of the city to visit her in her small apartment. She lived with an elderly woman who was her companion and served her as best she could. You could see that she loved her. She told me one day that Fulla prayed a lot and had religious visions. I thought that she might be a nun in disguise. Our friendship lasted until I had to leave Lvov. In her presence I found encouragement to help me fight off fits of depression.

It was during that time that I decided to be confirmed in the Catholic Church. Times were hard, and I wanted to become a fully fledged member. The Sacrament of Confirmation was given by a bishop at the ancient Lvov cathedral. It had a severe and lofty look, supported inside by enormous columns branching off high above into graceful arches. The faint and mysterious light came through the long stained glass windows. Even in the summer, the interior remained cool and dark. But on the day of confirmation, the cathedral was filled with light and crowds of people came to watch the many young people receive the sacrament. I chose Mary Mother of God and St. Theresa as my patrons, and a stranger put a hand on my shoulder as a witness.

Otherwise, the winter of 1941 was bitter, with gloomy weather and strong winds. I was depressed: I worried constantly about my mother, and found it hard to adjust to living with a new family. As an only child I had always been the centre of attention, and my mother was very affectionate. Suddenly I found myself alone, a burden to the people I lived with. Although Mrs. Szwabowicz was a good and religious woman, she was cold and reserved by nature. I could never expect any hugs from her.

Looking back, I realized later that I had been spoiled, with completely wrong priorities. One day while I was practicing my music for Fulla, the maid began to sweep the room. When she reached the piano, she asked me to move out of her way. I ignored her request, feeling that practicing music was a far more important task than cleaning – that could be done any time. But the maid, who was a husky woman, didn't discuss the subject: she just removed me physically from the stool and put me in another room. I was shocked, and felt that a terrible injustice had been done. I went to Mrs. Szwabowicz and complained bitterly – and to my surprise and humiliation, I was told never to interfere with the maid's work. I was learning my lesson.

The change was too sudden for me to accept easily. Before the war, I had been drenched with affection by my grandfather and my aunts Sophie and Mary. And I was accustomed to being treated as an adult: although I was only thirteen, I had a vast knowledge of arts and literature. Now, no one was interested in what I had to say, and I found the coldness and rejection very hard. When I walked alone through the streets of Lvov, I thought of suicide. But that was just wishful thinking; I was too religious to seriously consider committing suicide.

The grocery stores were totally empty, there was nothing to buy. From time to time a truck would arrive with bread and sugar, and immediately a long line formed – sometimes more than two kilometres. Families used every member to stand in the lines for food. Quite often, you had to get up at three o'clock in the morning to get a good start. After two or three hours, somebody else would replace you; and so on until you got some bread, or occasionally a piece of meat. Quite often, after people had spent hours waiting, the store would run out of food and people had to go home empty-handed. Sometimes we waited in cold so bitter that I had open sores on my fingers and toes from frostbite.

At one point, my life brightened up for a while with the hope of escaping. I have no idea how my father found out where I was, but he sent visas through the Romanian Consul for me and two of my cousins.

I had discovered them quite unexpectedly. They were both refugees from northeastern Poland: Katherine, who had a one-month-old son Andrew, and her sister Theresa.

Day after day, we stood in lines at the KGB offices with other foreigners trapped by the war. We filled out endless forms, only to be told to come back the next day. Unfortunately, it soon became clear that although the Soviets did supposedly allow people with official Romanian visas to leave Poland, the authorities were not prepared to let us go.

After two months of waiting for permission, everything changed in one day. That day, thousands of people were forcibly arrested during the night and put on cattle trains for Siberia. Among them were Theresa, Katherine and her baby son. The ethnic cleansing had begun.

Being sent to Asiatic parts of the Soviet Union – Siberia or Vorkuta – was everybody's greatest fear. Cattle trains loaded with Polish families were leaving every day. In our apartment building, one family after another was taken away. One night it was the family living above us; another night, the family below. We waited tensely for our turn to come – but for some unexplained reason, it never did.

In all, at that time about two million Poles were forced out from their homes and sent to gulags in Siberia, Kazakhstan and Vorkuta. Those who left were allowed to take only two suitcases, and had to leave behind their homes, furniture and all their other possessions. These were taken over by Russian families.

The German-Russian friendship broke down unexpectedly in June 1941, when Hitler attacked the Soviet Union. After a short bombardment, Lvov was taken by the German troops without a fight. People ran to the prisons to free the thousands of political prisoners arrested by the Soviets. They were all dead. Although the Soviets had left in a hurry, they had found enough time to murder their prisoners. Some were tortured to death – among them priests and nuns. One Dominican priest was crucified on the wall of his cell. In one prison, the heads of the murdered victims were covered with tar to make them difficult to identify. The bodies were laid out anyway for the relatives. It was July, and soon the stench of decomposing bodies spread over the city.

One enemy had left, and another arrived. Soon I was to learn the extent of the tragedy of the German army arriving. Almost their first act was to arrest and execute all the university professors and their families. Other signs of the new order were to appear soon. I went to see my friends Adam and his wife Janka, whom I met at the beginning of 1941. Adam was a lawyer, and they had two children about my age. They often invited me for tea and we had long and interesting discussions. They had a big library and gladly let me borrow their books. I enjoyed the company of these warm and friendly people.

When I went to see them in July, after the Germans had entered Lvov, they were anxious and depressed. They told me that from now on they would have to wear the Star of David on their sleeves. I was quite shocked; I didn't even know they were Jews. A few days later, they told me they would have to leave their lovely apartment and move to the ghetto, an area designated for the Jews by the Germans. Some people went into hiding. Adam's family decided against this, because it would mean splitting up, and they went to the ghetto together. Janka wasn't Jewish, but she said she would go wherever her husband and children went.

Once Lvov was in the hands of the Germans, I could send a letter to my aunt in Warsaw. Her answer came quickly: she paid a man to come to Lvov and bring me to her. Before I left to begin a new life in Warsaw, I said good-bye to Mrs. Szwabowicz and her daughters, and to all my friends – especially Fulla Horak, and Adam and Janka. I never saw Adam's family again.

Soon I was living with my Aunt Mary and her husband Zygmunt in a suburb of Warsaw called Bielany. My grandfather lived in the apartment below in the same building, and Aunt Mary took care of him. She asked me to take dinner to him every day, and we would chat. He was an engineer; and although he was eighty, he was in very good physical and mental shape. He was working on an invention that he felt had a great future after the war.

I began to attend high school in Warsaw, and every day I had a long trip by streetcar. The streetcars had a special section in front, reserved for Germans only. Nazi Germans regarded themselves as a master race, and would not mix with Poles. There were also security reasons for the segregation: Germans felt very unsafe in the company of Poles – and for good reason.

But when my grandfather took a streetcar, he would always sit in the front part. I asked him why he did this, as he could be arrested for it. His answer was: "I am in my own country, and I will sit wherever I want."

My new high school at Invalid Square in Warsaw was officially designated as a gardening school to satisfy the Germans, who only allowed trade schools for Poles – they had abolished all secondary education and universities. Despite these changes we maintained a patriotic atmosphere, because the teachers were the same as before the war. We learned the official curriculum subjects at school, and in private homes we learned forbidden subjects such as Latin, history and Polish literature.

Soon after joining the school, I was introduced to an underground organization of scouts and guides that prepared young people for the underground army. Our troop was called "The Bulls," because we were all born under the sign of Taurus. We had plenty of adventure, and the day was always too short for everything we students had to do – especially since there was a police curfew of 8 p.m., and everybody had to be home by then. (One of my courses was First Aid, and I was assigned to give my grandfather the injections he'd been prescribed. After my first try, he asked me gently, "Can you find a duller needle next time?!")

We were also trained in proficiencies that would be useful during the war. When we learned to use automatic pistols and revolvers, our excitement was accompanied by the fear of being caught and tortured. We used pseudonyms for safety in the underground, but of course we all knew each other's names from school. From time to time I would ask myself: "Could I withstand torture without revealing the names and addresses of the other underground members?" I couldn't answer that question.

Reprisals for underground work were brutal. The Germans often took hostages from people travelling to work. Their names were printed on large red posters throughout Warsaw, announcing that fifty hostages would be executed if any sabotage occurred anywhere in the country. The result was always the same: fifty hostages were publicly executed on one of Warsaw's main streets. The executions were usually carried out during the lunch hour, when the streets were packed with people. German soldiers arrived in army trucks to close off the street, and those who were there had to watch the execution. The hostages were brought in by military trucks, lined up against the wall, and shot in bursts of machine-gun fire. The bodies were taken away, and the superintendent of the building where the execution had taken place hosed away the blood on the pavement. A few hours later, flowers and lighted candles appeared in front of the wall where fifty lives had just been snuffed out. People said furtive prayers there. Later, the Germans would fill the young men's mouths with plaster before executing them, so they wouldn't shout "Long live Poland!" before their deaths.

My aunt didn't realize for several months that I was a member of the underground movement. But one day I came home after curfew, and she was anxiously waiting for me at the door. She was afraid I'd been arrested. She was so distressed that she turned pale with relief and fainted when I finally came in. But when she recovered, she asked me directly if I was member of the underground organization. When she found out the truth, she packed me off to a boarding school run by the Sisters of Nazareth – so I couldn't do underground work for a year. Then the school was closed and I had to come home. By this time my aunt had accepted the inevitable: that all young people had to fight the invaders.

In 1943 I took the underground soldier's oath in the presbytery of the church, witnessed by a priest who was himself a member of the underground. I promised to serve my country faithfully, and to keep the secrets of our organization even in the face of death. Then we went back to our training.

I took special courses in communications – learning how to build and repair telephone lines, and how to service army telephones and switchboards. We also learned military skills such as the techniques of street fighting.

Life was dangerous, and practically everything we did carried the death penalty. As a result nobody paid much attention to the German rules, although the consequences could be tragic. Patriotic youths were often arrested, tortured and killed, or sent to concentration camps to die a slow death. But that didn't stop us. On national holidays, we decorated historical monuments with flags and flowers. We also painted walls with the anchor emblem – the sign of hope and struggle. It was shaped to spell out the words "Poland is fighting."

Heinrich Himmler had begun organizing concentration camps on Polish territory back in 1940, to terrorize the population. The first ones were built at Auschwitz and Stutthof. The first transport of 728 Polish prisoners arrived there on June 14, 1940 – nearly all of them young men caught trying to escape to join the Allied Army. Over the next few years, more than two hundred camps were built. Their purpose was to provide the Germans with slave labour, before the prisoners died from undernourishment and sadistic treatment.

And in 1940, the Germans had begun a systematic campaign of exterminating the Polish Jews in the ghettos through starvation diets. A worker requires an average of 2,400 calories a day – the Jewish workers were given 184 calories. But though the Jews were dying of starvation, it wasn't fast enough for the Germans; and in the summer of 1942 they began their policy of immediate mass murder, liquidating the ghettos.

The final destruction of the Warsaw ghetto came in 1943. I had travelled through it a few times in a streetcar, and it was like seeing a tragic foreign land. The gates in the high walls were guarded by armed soldiers, who made sure that no one got in from the outside to bring relief. I saw overcrowded streets, with many emaciated people sitting starving on the sidewalks. Some looked at the streetcar as if it were an apparition from another world. The ghetto was a city within a city, ruled by other laws than the rest of the country. Its inhabitants were a people marked for immediate destruction.

In late April 1943, we heard explosions and saw that the sky was red with fire over the ghetto. An uprising had been started by a group of some seven hundred Jewish youths, who decided to die fighting instead of being led to the slaughter like sheep. When I saw the fires, I went to visit another student who lived in an apartment overlooking the ghetto. From the upstairs stairway I could see into the ghetto. The building on the other side of the wall was burning fiercely, with flames coming out of all the windows. German soldiers stood in front of the building with weapons, waiting for their prey. People came out of the burning building very slowly, one by one, with their hands up. I could hear German commands, lining them up along the wall. I knew what was going to happen next, and I didn't want to see it. Coming down the stairs, I could hear the bursts of machine-gun fire.

We were all aware of the terrible fate of the Jews, but there wasn't much we could do. All Poles were in constant danger from the German occupation forces, but we had the advantage of numbers: a country of thirty-six million people could not be destroyed easily. The Jews were in a different position. Although half the total Jewish population of Europe was in Poland, there were still only three million of them – and Nazi Germany did not recognize Jews as Polish citizens. We were all to give way for the German population expansion; but Hitler had singled the Jews out for destruction in the first round, Poles in the second. And when the Jews were forced into ghettos, only a few realized the extent of Hitler's plans.

Before the war, the Jews had mostly kept to themselves, divided from Poles by their religion. Some villages in Eastern Poland were more than half Jewish, living their separate lives. The Jewish religion didn't allow mixed marriages. Although they were Polish citizens, they dressed differently from us and spoke Yiddish – many were unable to speak fluent Polish. These people were ethnic islands within the community; so when the war broke out, it was difficult to pass them for Poles. (If the Nazis chose to look, the males could be always identified by their circumcisions.) Hiding the Jews was the only solution.

Of course, not all Jews kept to themselves – many, by their own choice, became part of Polish society. They were lawyers, doctors, politicians, writers, even poets. Many had exceptional talents and worked hard. Many were saved by their Polish friends during the war, and many Poles died trying to protect Jews. Being caught hiding a Jew meant death for the whole family. Sometimes the Germans sent families to Auschwitz; on one occasion, they publicly hanged all the members of a family on their own balcony, for giving refuge to a Jewish child.

In response to these atrocities, the Polish Underground created a special organization, "Zegota," whose sole purpose was saving Jews. They produced thousands of false documents for the Jews, helped greatly by the Catholic church. Monasteries and orphanages gave refuge to Jewish children secretly transferred from ghettos by their desperate parents; provided false baptismal certificates for Jews to allow them to pass as Poles; and provided food and shelter for the Jews in hiding. The Polish Home Army also posted an order punishing by death those who betrayed Jews to the Germans. These were the lowest criminal element, making money on human deaths.

By July 1944, the German army was in full retreat. The Soviet Army was closing in, and the thudding noise of the approaching front line could be heard quite clearly. The Germans announced that 100,000 young Poles would have to help build the defences on the Vistula River. The underground army feared that the youths would be killed after finishing their work. The risk of leaving that many people at the mercy of the Germans was too great. The decision was made to start an uprising and free Warsaw from German hands.

As the time set for the Uprising approached, the tension increasing every minute. As a messenger, I had been running to deliver final messages since early morning. I stopped briefly at the Convent of the Resurrection, where I put myself in God's care and was given a small medallion of the Virgin Mary. I felt proud to be one of the Freedom Fighters, and happy that the awaited moment had finally arrived. (My exalted feelings were only a little dampened when I remembered how my aunt had wanted to shut me up in the bathroom to stop me from doing my duty.)

As it happened, we lost the element of surprise. The Uprising was due to start at 5 p.m.; but at 3 p.m. some of our boys carrying arms and ammunition in Zoliborz suddenly found themselves facing German soldiers. Shots were exchanged, and the Uprising had begun. I was at Headquarters at the time, but was soon ordered to take some reports to the Powazki district. The streets and squares were deserted. I saw a woman standing uncertainly near one building, not knowing what to do. From the next street I could hear the crackle of machine-gun fire and the explosions of grenades. "That must be our boys," I thought. (Their average age was between fifteen and twenty, but they were splendid soldiers.)

Suddenly a group of German soldiers opened fire in our direction from about 100 metres away. I fell down, as we had practiced in our underground exercises, pulling down the woman, who just stood there helplessly. We were showered with broken pieces of stucco and bricks as the bullets thudded into the wall above us. Soon the Germans stopped shooting and turned their attention somewhere else. Taking advantage of the lull, I moved on.

But after a while I met an obstacle I couldn't get around. German soldiers were blocking every street, lying behind trees and shrubs and shooting at our troops, who were attacking from several sides. It was clear that the German automatic pistols and machine guns were superior. I was forced to return, taking with me a little boy who had been caught in the crossfire away from home.

Back at my post, I was given a new assignment – and a red-and-white armband bearing the Polish Eagle and the number of my platoon. It was a very moving moment. After so many years of German occupation, I was wearing the Polish national colours openly for the first time.

I was ordered to direct the flow of people entering and leaving a large apartment building called the "Glass House." They looked at my armband with incredulity, hardly believing that the underground work was over and that the time had come to fight openly. I found a moment to go upstairs and look out of the windows at what was going on. Among the weeds in an overgrown field, I noticed some helmets moving. At first I thought they belonged to Germans; but looking more carefully, I saw they were our boys. Some wore German helmets the underground had collected, others Polish helmets hidden since 1939. Most were bare-headed. They had a variety of weapons: a few rifles, some pistols, revolvers and grenades.

Unfortunately, our exultation didn't last long. After failed attempts to conquer our targets, late at night our Commander, "Zywiciel," decided to retreat to the Kampinos forest. Those who wanted could go back home; those who wished to continue to fight were to march to the forest. I decided to go to Kampinos. It started to rain, and kept on raining until we reached our destination. We marched as quietly as possible, unnoticed by the Germans. At the suburb of Bielany, where I lived, we had to pass close by the military airport. From time to time, flares would illuminate the dark sky and we had to fall down in the mud until darkness returned and it was safe to move on. During one such incident, we heard an explosion. It turned out that a home-made grenade had exploded, fatally wounding its owner. He was left at Bielany and we continued our march.

We reached the trees at dawn, and felt safe there The forests were in the hands of the Polish partisans, and the Germans avoided them if they could help it. Our destination was a group of forest rangers' buildings. We were totally exhausted when we reached the barns and utility buildings. We fell asleep on the floor fully clothed, and slept like logs.

The next morning, I can still remember my surprise when I saw our commander, Colonel Mieczyslas Niedzielski, for the first time. He was short and stocky, wore civilian clothing and walked under a black umbrella. He didn't look very heroic! However, he was an excellent commander.

Later that day, a courier from Warsaw brought us orders from the head of the Polish Home Army, General Bor Komorowski, to return to Zoliborz immediately. All Warsaw was fighting, and the Germans were unable to extinguish the uprising. We went back the same way we had come; the rain continued, the mud got deeper, and we were so tired that we were falling asleep as we walked. The Germans noticed our arrival in Bielany and attacked us with tanks. We hid in small houses occupied by workers' families, who tried to help us as much as they could. They hid in the basements while our boys threw grenades and gasoline-filled bottles at the tanks. The battle lasted all day. At dusk the Germans retreated; we had lost twenty-two fighters.

We reached Zoliborz that night, and our troops took up their positions in apartment buildings. With the help of the civilians, we built barricades so that our soldiers could defend our independent territory against prowling German tanks. Still, the sky belonged to the German planes, which sometimes bombed us three or four times a day; and their cannons and mortars rained fire on us non-stop. Most terrifying were the rocket mortars, which came in groups of eight, spreading death and havoc among the population. There were also unmanned Goliath tanks carrying explosives, which did a lot of damage; and constant machine gun fire from outside buildings. To protect ourselves, we dug connecting trenches across the streets and from house to house. Because of the constant bombing, the civilian population lived in the cellars. The nights were a little quieter; but our greatest problems were lack of arms, ammunition and food.

I was sent with the communications patrol to lay cables and organize the telephone service. My duties consisted of servicing field telephones and switchboards. The watches would pass on their observations about the movements of the German army to the switchboard operators, who in turn passed the information on to the commandant. The situation changed often. However, it took a while for me to get used the constant barrage. When the explosions got really loud, I was so fearful that I would hide behind our quartermaster. He was a large man, and his back seemed to offer good protection! (We called him "the Old Man," and he took good care of us as far as possible under the conditions. Food was scarce: our only meal every day was a coarse kind of oatmeal, with lots of hard hulls.)

Death became our close companion, and seeing people wounded and killed no longer made much impression on me. But it was different when I saw a young soldier from our platoon badly wounded. He was carried in on a stretcher before being moved to the hospital. I looked at him and gasped; he had no face, only one horrible wound. My first thought was very selfish: God preserve me from such a wound.

In the second month of the uprising, the Soviet army began to drop arms, ammunition and military biscuits. It was their gesture for the Allies, showing that they were helping our uprising against the Germans. Our joy didn't last long: the arms and ammunition, often thrown without parachutes, were usually damaged beyond repair. One night, the sky suddenly lit up with flares. I could hear planes flying low overhead; then containers started to fall around me. I flung myself to the ground and tried to make myself as small as possible. It would had been terrible getting killed by a bag of biscuits!

We were on the go all the time, from one assignment to the next. It was the best way to forget about the hovering death. Sometimes, though, it was hard to forget. I remember crawling over a pile of rubble one sunny afternoon, when a ray of sunlight hit a strand of beautiful blond hair sticking out from among the broken bricks. To whom did it belong? Who was under this pile of bricks?

One particular day etched itself in my memory. I was awakened by the sound of airplanes and the nearby explosions of bombs. As I left to report for duty at my station, the sun was shining warmly, its rays lighting the trees and shrubs in the courtyard. For a moment I couldn't believe there was a war on. But at a street corner a few steps farther on, there was an enormous bomb crater with human remains at the bottom. I got through an open area that was often under German fire without incident, and reached the entrance to the Glass House just as the planes arrived. The bombs fell so close that we could hear them hissing as they fell. We breathed a sign of relief when the planes flew away.

The morning went by, then the afternoon. Again we heard the planes coming. Suddenly the whole building shook violently, and a cloud of white powdery dust from the crumbling walls turned us into white mummies. Dazed but unharmed, I ran outside, as the shaky silhouettes of other people emerged from doorways. I went to see where the bomb had hit. With disbelief I saw a gaping hole where the lobby full of people had been. The building had been cut in half. Shaken, I went by trench to the next building, crawling through an opening made in the foundation into a cellar. The ground floor was covered with stretchers full of the wounded.

Among the moans I recognized a voice calling my name. It was my friend Klara, a nurse, who had been seriously wounded as she ran through a field. Because of heavy gunfire, nobody was able to reach her for many hours. With great difficulty, she had managed to put a pressure bandage on her own thigh to stop the bleeding; now she was waiting, without painkillers, for her turn to be taken to the hospital. (Our hospitals were in the coal cellars for safety. Our dedicated doctors and nurses worked day and night, often without sleep and by candlelight, to sew up mangled bodies and amputate useless limbs.)

I found somebody to help me carry Klara there, through the same field where she had been wounded. This time all was quiet. Exhausted by the day's events, I suddenly felt faint. In order not to drop the stretcher, I had to put it down very quickly. She moaned loudly. Somebody else replaced me, and she was taken to the hospital. The doctor wanted to amputate her leg, but she wouldn't allow it. She died the same night from loss of blood.

Another victim from our scouting Platoon 227 was the commander, Cadet Adam. He was killed during a German attack on our barricade. I had known him from the first day of the Uprising, and when I heard about his death I couldn't stop crying. It took me quite a while to get over it. His body, wrapped in black plastic, was buried next to the apartment building where we stayed.

Members of Platoon 227 were called the "Canal Rats," because these boys kept communication with the rest of Warsaw by going through the underground sewer system. The water had stopped running a few days after the Uprising began. Long lines of civilians formed at the wells for drinking water; washing was a luxury nobody could afford; and we dug pit toilets in the courtyards, since those in the buildings couldn't be used. But the now-useless sewers served another purpose for the Home Army: they became our communication and supply lines, and an escape and evacuation route for the troops.

By the second month of the Uprising the Germans were damaging our telephone lines more and more often, and they had to be repaired constantly. I gladly volunteered to do this job; I preferred moving around to sitting in one place. The job was quite simple: I would check for broken wires with a special telephone, do the repair, then check the connection. But constant bombardment, explosions and shelling were damaging the cables faster than they could be repaired, and many people were killed and wounded while repairing the lines. The commander eventually decided to use us as couriers.

Once I was sent on a secret mission, to replace a guide who had fallen ill. This guide used to lead our patrols from Zoliborz to the German-occupied suburb of Bielany, where arms and ammunition were hidden in an orphanage. I was given a pistol and four grenades, and told to use them only as a final resort. There were seven of us: me, and six strong armed men to carry the heavy supplies. We left at midnight from an old factory building. We had to cross an open area of several kilometres of sand dunes, without any buildings or vegetation, and secured by the Germans with machine gun fire. We walked like shadows; when flares lit up the dunes we would fall down and hug the ground. A fight with the Germans was to be avoided at all costs; there would be no help coming if we got in trouble. Fortunately, the Germans didn't like to come out at night.

Finally we arrived at the orphanage and got our load. We started back immediately, to take advantage of the darkness; but at dawn I realized that I had lost my way. The situation was very dangerous, but I didn't let anyone know what had happened – I didn't want the soldiers to panic. Finally we did make it back, though not to the positions where we were expected. I was greatly relieved, since it was my responsibility to bring everybody back safely.

The last days of the Warsaw Uprising are still very vivid in my mind. Catastrophe seemed unavoidable; still, we didn't consider capitulating. The complex of apartment buildings occupied by our command, "Giraffe," occupied 20 and 29 Krasinski Street as well as the convent of the Sisters of the Resurrection. All these buildings were heavily damaged by bombs and artillery fire; the large convent was exposed to enemy fire from three sides, where there were open fields. There was only one trench joining our positions. After heavy artillery fire, the Germans often attacked the convent with tanks and infantry.

These attacks were always repelled; but in the final days the situation changed. The artillery fire on all three positions was intense and devastating, and we thought it would never end. Attacks by the tanks and infantry came in waves. One of the boys, codenamed "Fox," described it this way: "The gray dawn was beginning to light up the sky when the flood of fire and steel exploded around us in a never-ending assault. Shells were landing one next to the other. Every square metre was covered with craters." Communication with the convent was broken when a corner of the building nearest it collapsed, its ruins burying part of the trench. Since the convent was our bastion against the German attacks, it was essential to regain communication at any cost.

Our commander, "Tatar," asked for a volunteer, and I decided to go. Our boys told me it was a difficult, if not impossible, task – they didn't believe I could reach the convent. It was already heavily damaged by artillery shells; now the Germans had used a flame thrower to start fires on the top floors. But I was determined to go. Once I left the safety of our building I was in an open area, all alone. I crawled slowly over piles of bricks from the ruined building, trying not to be noticed by the Germans. I saw little fountains of sand rising into the air as bullets hit the ground next to me. Finally I was able to jump into the remains of the trench. In front of me was the big hole in the convent wall, the only entrance, and it was under fire from a Tiger tank's powerful cannon. I said to myself, "I have to move immediately when it fires its next shot." Then I hesitated: "If I stumble, what then?" I tried not to think; I just jumped. I was lucky. No shots hit me as I raced inside and gained the safety of the convent's thick walls.

But the situation inside was tragic. There were many dead and wounded, lying in a large hall in the basement. More bandages were needed, and the ammunition was almost gone. The Germans were attacking the windows, and there was hand-to-hand combat in one wing. While I waited for "Jan," the convent commander, a sixteen-year-old boy was brought in with one leg missing. He was conscious, and I thought that he didn't know about his leg; but he did know, and was in despair. "How will I fight the Germans?" he said. In his distress, he was still thinking about the war. But there was no time for conversation; I had to go back and report on the situation at the convent.

In the meantime the German tanks had withdrawn from their positions at Krasinski 29, so the return trip was a little easier. After I reported back, we began to bring ammunition and dressings to the convent, which had repulsed the German attack by the time I got there. In spite of being totally exhausted and grey with dust, we all breathed a sigh of relief. Reinforcements arrived: a unit containing our youngest scout fighters, called "Zawiszaki." They moved along a corridor throwing grenades as the Germans renewed their attack and tried to enter the building. There was heavy loss of life.

I had to report back to my post; but later I found out what had happened at the convent. Soon there was another danger: the weakened walls could collapse at any moment. Two girl couriers and a scout named Andrew, not realizing the danger, were running under a wall when it collapsed. The two girls were killed outright and Andrew was buried up to his waist in the ruined walls; he couldn't free himself. His comrades tried desperately to free him with their bare hands, but to no avail. Andrew begged them to leave him, with a pistol and ammunition so that he could defend himself to the end. They granted his wish. His fellow scouts, cut off from the rest by the fallen wall, fought to the last bullet. Those who didn't perish were taken prisoner.

The Germans were preparing for the final attack, intending to take the whole building. Commander Jan, unable to retain his position, decided to retreat. The upper floors were already on fire; now, at his order, the basement was set fire to as well. Gasoline was poured over the beds where the dead lay, and the smoke covered the retreat of those remaining.

But Tatar was unaware of all this, and sent me to the convent again in the evening with orders to retreat. My heart was heavy with sadness at this; but when I reached the building, the stillness surprised me. There were a few shots here and there, but otherwise only silence. The large corridor at the entrance was filled with smoke. I went deeper into the building, calling the commander's name. There was no answer. The only sound, coming from the depths of the building, was a series of shots. Finally, I realized that nobody was there, and I was mistaking the explosion of burning ammunition for the sound of fighting. Almost suffocating from the smoke, I ran into the basement hall where the wounded had lain that morning. There was no one there but the dead, burning in their beds. I realized that I was totally alone. At first I was paralyzed with fear, thinking that maybe the Germans had cut off my escape. I knew about their atrocities and sadism. In panic I ran for the exit, but there was no one around – only the red setting sun.

As I stood thinking that this was the end of a long and momentous day, two civilians came up and told me that there were two wounded soldiers in an abandoned building. I found a nurse, and we went with a stretcher to the ruined building. Part of it was burned down, and the wounded were in a coal cellar. It would be difficult to get them out, because the street entrance of the building was already occupied by the Germans. We had to bring the wounded one by one to the ground floor and evacuate them through a window on the other side.

This was very painful for the wounded, but it had to be done; we knew that in spite of the Geneva Convention, the Germans were executing our wounded.

New orders came to retreat in the direction of the River Vistula. We still had some hopes that help would come. The whole Giraffe command moved out and gradually all our troops followed. I went in search of Platoon 227, but couldn't find them. They were at the old quarters; and in the chaos of the general retreat of the Home Army, the orders hadn't reached them. I rushed back through the underground maze of cellars, packed with civilians. Somebody put a teaspoon of jam in my mouth – a deeply moving gesture, because there was much hunger. I found a group of lost soldiers trying to find their platoon. There was a short downhill path to the shallow trench that led to the Glass House. It was often the site of heavy fire, and this time was no exception. After attempting it and barely escaping with my life, I tried another route. The boys followed me one by one.

All our fighting units were now concentrated around the Glass House, and it was there that we heard about a one-hour armistice. Our boys rested and cleaned their weapons. Soon afterwards, we heard that our surrender had been arranged. It was a terrible shock – we couldn't believe it. So many sacrifices, so many dead, all for nothing! We sat in gloomy silence, devastated.

We stayed the night beside the burning Glass House, where two months before we had started the Uprising so full of hope. In the morning our troops, fully armed, marched between two lines of armed Germans to the square. The Germans had placed tanks at the four corners of the square with their guns turned in towards us as we marched, laying down our arms. On the 13th of September 1944, Zoliborz capitulated.

Just before the surrender, I was decorated with the Order of Virtuti Militari and promoted to Sergeant in the underground army. This order for bravery has a special meaning for Poles: the name means

"Military Virtue," and it represents outstanding military valour and leadership. I know that many others who deserved this distinction more than I didn't get it, because their heroism had no witnesses. Nevertheless I was very proud to be chosen to represent them all.

What went on in the other parts of Warsaw as the uprising ended was best described by Wisia, who later became my sister-in-law. She was a nurse, picking up the wounded wherever they fell and taking care of them. On the evening of September 1st, as it got dark, they decided to use the sewers to retreat with the walking wounded. The badly wounded had to stay behind. Wisia decided to stay with the severely wounded, and said goodbye to the boys from her unit.

In the morning the Germans burst in, screaming "Bandits, bandits!" The commander asked her if she and the wounded were the only people in the building. She said "Yes," but he kept his gun on her and ordered his soldiers to check under every bed to make sure she was telling the truth. Her face was as white as a sheet, and fear made her speechless. After the inspection the German lowered his gun and ordered the wounded to be moved to the hospital at Dluga Street.

The Germans were getting ready to leave and their voices seemed to be gentler. She turned to the commander and asked him if his soldiers could help her to move the wounded. He flew into a rage, pointing his gun at her again. "German soldiers will not carry Polish pigs!" he screamed. Scared out of her wits, she stammered, "I will manage, I will find somebody to help me." The Germans left, warning that they would be back soon and anyone remaining would be shot.

Wisia ran out into the street and begged passersby to help her move the wounded. Soon she found some helpers; they had to go to the hospital first to get the stretchers. She watched to make sure that everybody was taken. In the hospital courtyard was a piece of cloth painted with an enormous swastika. Suddenly German ambulances arrived, and the Germans started to remove their own wounded (who a few days before had been our prisoners). They were also looking for somebody. Finally they found him: a young Polish partisan with a crew-cut. They took him out in the courtyard and shot him. Wisia never learned who he was.

There was much worse to come. Around noon, the Germans arrived back in force. Wisia saw a great commotion in the courtyard: those who could move were crawling from their rooms and cellars, hoping to save themselves. She went back to help the young soldier closest to the door. He could only use one leg; the other was badly wounded, bent at the knee. She gave him a broom for support, which he used on one side as a crutch; and leaning heavily on her shoulder, he left the room. Behind the door were two Germans with automatic pistols. Wisia and the wounded young man began the slow descent, step by step. One of the Germans directed her to the courtyard, where they were told to stand on one side with the other wounded. The civilians were on the opposite side. The distance between the two groups kept getting smaller as more people came out and filled up the courtyard. German soldiers walked up and down between the two groups to keep order.

Suddenly she had a premonition that something terrible was about to happen. She pulled the wounded boy, whose name was Ikar, to the civilian side. But a German noticed them and ordered them back. Then another came up and said, "Nurse, you are not needed here. Go to the other side."

It dawned on her that this side meant death. Suddenly her legs felt paralyzed; but the German pushed her roughly to the civilian side. She stood there for a few minutes, observing everything carefully. The situation was becoming more and more chaotic. The Germans had probably received fresh orders, because they kept looking at their watches and began to regroup the newcomers, whose number was constantly increasing. They shouted loudly and their behaviour became even more brutal. Wisia took advantage of the confusion and moved Ikar again to the civilian side. Again a German noticed, but this time he let them stay there.

Suddenly there was an enormous outcry. She could hear shooting in the building and the noise of airplanes flying overhead. They began to bombard the hospital with incendiary bombs; and at the same time, the Germans opened fire with machine guns on the wounded gathered outside. It was hell. The screams, and the clouds of dust and smoke, rose to heaven. She stopped thinking. She became part of the terrified crowd, waiting for the end.

Her heart pounding, she turned her head away so as not to look at the massacre. By then, the hospital was burning fiercely. Then through the smoke she noticed their army chaplain, Father Rostworowski, standing with his hands outstretched to give the last blessing to the dying. Clouds of dust and smoke blocked her view; but whenever the wind blew them away, Father Rostworowski still stood there with his hands raised in prayer to God.

Wisia found out later that the Germans shot 430 people at the hospital; those who couldn't move were shot in their beds.

As soon as Platoon 227 had laid down its arms, we became prisoners of war and were marched away under German guard. Knowing that the Uprising had ended, the Soviet Army began to shell Zoliborz. Shrapnel exploded nearby, and our German guards crouched in fear. But we were too depressed to feel fear. And despite the shock of defeat and our sorrow for the lost lives, we did also feel relieved that nobody would be killed or maimed that day.

The Germans took us to Pioneer Park in Powazki for the night, and then the next day to Pruszkow. The concrete floor of the huge warehouse was so crowded that I couldn't find a place to lie down for the night. Boys from my platoon tried to make room for me, but they stretched out in their sleep and I lost my place.

The next day we were packed like sardines into a cattle car and sent to the camp of Gross Lubars, near Magdeburg. Our train often stopped to let military transports go through. We could hear Allied bombs exploding quite close. We were worried; it would be a joke to survive the Uprising only to be killed by American bombs.

Gross Lubars was a very large camp, with many wooden barracks. A neighbouring camp was occupied by prisoners of war from the Allied Forces. When the wounded began to arrive from Warsaw I visited them every day, singing scout and partisan songs to cheer them up. The saddest ones were the boys who had been blinded in the Uprising. One gave me a Polish Eagle fashioned from a metal can. I also visited seriously wounded girls in the hospital. One of them was Rita, whose sister Veronica, a nurse, was my troop leader in Warsaw. Rita was badly wounded, with many dangerous shrapnel wounds. At one point, she was close to death. Gradually she recovered; but it was many years before all the pieces of shrapnel were out of her body.

A couple of weeks after our arrival at the camp, the Germans sent sixty of us girls to work in a war factory in the little village of Parchen. It was only a country road with a few houses, a movie theatre and a one-storey building with a flat roof that looked like a huge garage, but was in fact a factory that produced parts for airplanes and tanks. Our arrival caused enormous excitement among the Dutch and Belgian labourers there: they had never seen female prisoners of war before. (We still wore our red and white armbands bearing the Polish Eagle and our platoon numbers.)

Although our work began at 6 a.m. and ended at 6 p.m., we had comparative freedom in Parchen. We were housed in the movie theatre, with straw on the floor to sleep on. There were no guards, and we were free after work. When the weather was fine, we liked to take walks in the forest. For breakfast we had bread, margarine and marmalade; for dinner, thick vegetable soup with meat.

In the factory, we were assigned to different types of work. Some of the girls did welding; I was given work at the electric lathe. My master was a good-natured German who explained to me patiently what I was expected to do. I refused to cooperate, though – according to the Geneva Convention, we weren't supposed to be employed in any production work, and I certainly didn't want to help the Germans in their war effort. My master soon realized what I thought when he saw big pieces of steel damaged and the lathe machine stuck! In despair, he let me do anything I wanted, as long as I didn't touch his machine. I took advantage of this privilege to visit other girls at their work stations, or to sleep in the corner behind some tools.

This state of affairs didn't last long, unfortunately. One day an SS officer came to suggest that we relinquish our prisoner of war rights and join the civilian population. In return we would receive better quarters and better food. He gave us a couple of days to think things over. We decided to remain prisoners of war. The Germans were not pleased, and decided to punish us. Next day, guards appeared carrying rifles; and from then on we were taken to work under guard and even guarded in the factory – to the great amazement of the Dutch and Belgian workers. Our movie house dormitory was lit all night long, and we were not allowed to use the outdoor toilet; a bucket was brought in instead.

Eventually we were taken off factory work and made to work outside, carrying heavy beams of wood back and forth. Our food also changed for the worse. After six weeks of this, we were taken back to our previous camp; and two days later we were loaded on a cattle train and sent to a German POW camp called Oberlangen, near the Dutch border.

We arrived there on Christmas Eve, and didn't get any food that day – perhaps the camp wasn't ready for our arrival. Stalag VI C Oberlangen was an all-women camp, situated in a barren area of swamps with no villages in sight. Barracks each provided room for 200 people; and we girls from Zoliborz stayed together in Barracks 5. Inside were three-tiered bunk beds. My friend Lucyna and I chose to share the top bunk, although there were no ladders. We reasoned that the straw covering the planks would fall on others, not on us! At the end of the barracks was a washroom with twenty taps with running cold water – in the morning, they were usually covered with ice. It took courage to undress and wash in the icy water. The barracks had only one metal stove, heated with turf bricks.

Every morning we had to stand at attention in front of the barracks, while our company leader reported the number of prisoners and the number of sick to the German SS officer. Then the Germans, who were always accompanied by vicious dogs, would count us again. This was a lengthy procedure, considering that there were over 1,500 women. Then our leader would assign us chores for the day: cleaning the barracks, helping in the kitchen, bringing the loaves of bread from the warehouse, supplying turf for fuel, bringing large buckets of soup from the kitchen.

The least popular job was emptying the toilet ditches. Every so often, a German farmer would arrive with a horse-drawn tank to empty out the liquid manure. These primitive outdoor toilets were deep and dangerous: they were slippery in winter, and it was easy to fall in. This happened once to a friend of mine during the night. Fortunately, she wasn't alone and was pulled out before she could drown. None of us had any extra clothing, so she had to stay in her bunk, covered with straw, until her clothing was washed and dried by her friends. (There was talk among us of an Italian soldier who had once drowned in the ditch, whose ghost would appear from time to time.)

Along with hunger, vermin was our worst problem: we fought a losing battle with bedbugs and lice. I was still wearing the same clothing I had worn when I left home to fight the Germans. At night I couldn't sleep for hours because of the bugs, and the sucking feeling of an empty stomach didn't help. Our only consolation was the sound of the Allied bombers who flew in waves over Germany at night. We often thought with envy about the pilots, who were free men.

We were constantly hungry, and our main topic of conversation was food. Sometimes I was able to get a potato, which I carefully cut into thin slices and baked against the metal stove. Our greatest joy was to receive a parcel from the Red Cross, containing chocolate, condensed milk, cocoa, cans of meat and cigarettes. (We were supposed to get these every month, but I only got two in six months.) When parcels arrived, we would have parties for many days. How long a parcel lasted depended on the character of the owner. Some ate everything practically in one sitting; others divided the food into small portions.

I belonged to the group which ate everything very fast, while Lucyna liked to make hers last.

Time dragged. Every day felt like a month. We visited friends in other barracks and took walks along the barbed wire fences. Lectures were organized on various topics, languages were taught, a play was produced. Still, a deep depression took hold of me again and I lost interest in life. Fortunately, others were more active. At Easter, celebrations were organized by our Italian chaplain, who didn't speak a word of Polish. Masses were celebrated in an empty barracks and our camp artist drew a charcoal silhouette of Christ behind barbed wire. On Good Friday, I volunteered with a group of other girls to keep a guard of honour at Christ's tomb. We changed over every half hour, but thirty minutes was too much for two girls: they fainted, too weak to stand. During the Easter Sunday Mass, girls served as altar boys while the priest gave a general absolution and Holy Communion.

We knew that the Allied front line was approaching fast. The Germans became very restless and treated us better than usual. Then one day the shots could be heard. Our commander ordered us to stay inside the barracks, to be out of the way of stray bullets. Then suddenly, through the windows, we saw tanks – and they were not German tanks! Nobody could stop us from running outside. We heard commands in Polish, and knew that we were free – liberated by the advance troops of the First Polish Corps of General Maczek. That day was April 12, 1945.

Fifty years later, there was a veterans' reunion. It was a very happy and deeply emotional meeting of survivors, brothers in arms. I met Lucyna again, though at first I didn't recognize her because she was wearing a nun's garb. As for the "boys," I could hardly believe that these balding, greying gentlemen were the same young Boy Scouts who had fought so bravely many years ago! But then the fifty years melted away in front of our eyes, and we were young again as we relived our experiences and talked about our lives since we had last met.

Lou Marr –
née Pound

I'm the original turnip from the truck: I grew up on a farm near Daysland, Alberta, with no running water, no inside bathroom, no electricity and no phone. In the summer of 1942, I fell off the truck with a thud. In the space of ten days I graduated from high school, buried my dad and got married.

The last day of school was sombre. A lot of the boys had joined up so that was the last day we were all together. I remember shaking hands with the minister's son... he didn't come back. Steve joined the air force and was drowned off the West Coast. Two redheaded young men were sent to the Pacific, captured and put in the forced marches on Bataan Island. They came back, but as broken men: their health was gone. My young husband left from Camrose, Alberta in the pouring rain, and I didn't see him again for four years.

That winter was long and cold, and somehow I made up my mind to join the air force – a fascinating choice, since the only aircraft I'd ever seen were the lone planes of pilots making a living "stunting" over farmers' fields.

My mom took me to Edmonton, where I joined the troop train going east. A few dozen Aussies and New Zealanders who had just won their wings were on it; and all night long they counted: "Forty thousand *sheeps,* fifty thousand *sheeps....*" Finally the car quieted down, and we had a little sleep.

I'd picked April to go to Ottawa because I thought the weather there would be nice and the flowers out. I was wrong. There were piles of dirty snow everywhere and the buildings were grey.

The parade square was windy and wet. It was years before I got the black dye out of my ankles: black cotton stockings were the order of the day then, and the dye ran when it got wet. Pantyhose hadn't been invented yet, so everyone wore garter belts – but all the rubber went for the war effort. That didn't improve our undergarments: my garter belt gave up on the parade square. My stockings headed south, and I had to mince off the square. Elastic in panties wasn't great either: a friend of mine lost hers right on Sparks Street! We gathered around her like a herd of muskox while she stepped out of the troublesome garment.

Eventually, the heavy black shoes we had to wear gave my feet blisters, and I got blood poisoning. I didn't want to miss anything, so I laced my shoes on tight in the morning and wouldn't take them off until after work. I may owe my life to a vigilant sergeant, who made me take off my shoes and found that I had an angry line going up my leg. I ended up in sick bay.

Being from a small town, I'd never seen traffic lights and always hesitated when crossing streets. I navigated by sight, and got off the bus on the wrong side of the Cenotaph several times. The bus fare from Rockcliffe base into town was a dime, and much of the time we didn't have the dime to get back to the base. When the bus stopped at the guardhouse we'd just get off and run, with an irate bus driver screaming behind us.

I bunked with three other young women. One was a beautiful Indian girl who had nightmares, and I would often walk with her around the barracks until she shook off the bad dreams. I had a top bunk, and to get a little cool air I would lie close to the wall. This had one disadvantage, though: I couldn't be seen during a bed check. I was very indignant at being pulled up as AWOL when I wasn't. I explained this to the officer, and said that my roomies would back me up. Her retort was that of course we'd lie for each other. She was probably right.

Despite this, I was told that I had top military clearance and was supposed to go into code and cypher work. I'm glad that I didn't, because it almost drove one of my roommates crazy. But I'm still proud that I had that level of clearance.

I had always loved cameras, starting with my mom's old box Brownie, so I jumped at the chance to join the photography class. I started by proving that I was able to focus one of those cameras that you had to put a black cloth over your head to use. We did all kinds of stuff, such as photographing broken parts of aircraft for investigation of stress points. (Sometimes there were accidents on base. Rockcliffe looked down on the airfield, and one-day I saw a Mosquito land and burst into flames. The pilot didn't have a chance. That aircraft was made with very flammable material.)

We also learned aerial photography and how to make aerial maps. Aerial photographers would lie in the bottom of an aircraft, with just Plexiglas between them and what seemed like miles of open air below. The coveralls I wore were too large and baggy, and the parachute was heavier than I was. But I had no trouble flying with those teenaged pilots, lying face down in the belly of the plane as it soared above the patchwork land. (Yet strangely, nowadays I won't fly in one of the huge modern planes.)

The dark room was a great place, although we often had to strip to our underwear while working in the muggy Ontario nights. I always found it interesting to see a print come to life.

The photo course was to prepare us to take the place of the men as they were posted overseas – which I would have loved myself. I remember once sitting commiserating with a young fellow: he was crying because he was posted overseas, and I was crying because I wasn't!

While at Rockcliffe, I spent a lot of time on Victory marches through the capital for war bond sales and the like. One hot night we were bussed into Ottawa to listen to some speeches by the brass. The speeches were deadly, and I wanted out. I knew I'd be visible if I stood up, so I dropped to my knees and slithered out of the row to the back of the auditorium. I regained my feet, dusted myself off and came eye to eye with a young officer. I guess he was as bored as I was.

We had to salute everything with brass, so a stroll down Sparks Street was an exercise in bending the arm. The officers hated it as much as we peasants did.

Every time we had a "forty-eight" or a "thirty-six," we took off for somewhere. I went to Brockville and walked along the boardwalk. The water of the St. Lawrence was emerald green. On another trip I went to Montreal and found a dance hall, where I was happy to see old-time dancing on one side and boogying on the other. I quickly joined in! On St. Catherine Street I saw a group of messy-looking sailors being herded out of a side street by an MP. He told me to stay out of that street because it was a red light district. Of course this kid from the prairie had no idea what a "red light district" was, but I took the advice anyway and stayed on the main street.

Back in Ottawa, one bright sunny day we happened to see a sign saying "Stables." It was right along our bus route, so we decided to get off and hire horses for the day. It was a great day. We meandered through streets and parks, over railroad tracks... Eventually it was time to return the horses to the stable. Unfortunately, by this time we had no idea where that was. We finally turned the horses loose and they got us back.

Whenever a class graduated, celebration was in order. A lot of the classes went across the river into Hull, but this wasn't too bright since the zoot suiters (complete with baggy pants and chains) took a dim view of anything in uniform. More than once fights ensued, and several people ended up in jail to cool off. Some of our male members were so severely beaten up that they had to go to hospital. However, they probably gave as good as they'd got.

After six months at Rockcliffe, I was posted out to Dauphin, Manitoba. I'd been hoping for Alberta so I could be closer to my folks, but that didn't happen. There were only two postings left, and I remember one strange woman saying to me: "OK, you little bitch, I know that you want this Alberta posting, so I'm taking it."

The posting to Dauphin was the best thing that happened to me, though. It was a great station. I ran around with a bunch of young guys – no hanky-panky, just a lot of laughs and dancing. Dancing was legal six nights a week. On Sunday nights we put a blanket up over the drill hall windows and just carried on! One of my favourite tunes was *Paper Dolls I Can Call My Own*. Whenever I hear it, I'm transported back.

Our duties there involved quite a bit of darkroom work. Each Service Flying Technical School (SFTS) class was photographed, and all kinds of events were covered: funerals, parties, visiting dignitaries, parades. We recorded scenes from daily life as well, and some pictures (although not mine, unfortunately) went into the air force *Wings* magazine. Some of us also taught the aircrews how to do aerial mapping. And we did a lot of "joe jobs", such as painting tables and window frames. Once in the winter, two of us carrying four gallons of paint from stores fell in the middle of the icy road. We just sat there and laughed our fool heads off.

I joined the band; and a little French kid and I would often break up practice with our uncontrollable giggles. If you want a headache, try practising in a band hut with each instrument playing a different tune! I still have the drumsticks I bought in Saskatoon, after sleeping on a park bench on the Bessborough Hotel lawn. I also still have my tunic top, with the LAW propellers and a drum symbol sewn onto the sleeve. (A few years ago I decided to wear it in a parade but found the sleeves too short and the shoulders too narrow.)

At Dauphin we'd count the aircraft going out in the early morning, and them count them again as they came in at night. If one were missing, a pall would come over the station until we received word of what had happened. One young pilot I heard about went down with his aircraft; but when the search planes went overhead he stood up, on two broken legs, to wave to them. Apparently his hair turned white overnight.

Every chance I had, I'd head back to the family farm in Alberta. The train would arrive there about four in the morning, so I'd go and stay at the local hotel. A sign in the lobby read, "Pick your own room and pay in the morning." So I would creep upstairs on the worn carpet and find a room that I hoped was unoccupied. I would feel around the wall for a light switch, often unsuccessfully; and pull the old dresser across the door to discourage visitors. The next day someone would come to pick me up, and we'd drive out to the farm.

Life went on in Dauphin. When the end of the war in sight, demobilization started and I was transferred to the Currie Barracks in Calgary. A few weeks later my discharge came through, and I went back to Daysland. Eventually my soldier husband returned back to Canada, and we moved to British Columbia. He had a job there, and I worked off and on as a nurse's aide. We had four children – now we have six grand children and two great-grand children! My husband died five years ago, and I continue to enjoy life in the second house we built, in Windermere Valley.

I often feel nostalgic for the war years. About ten years ago I went back to Dauphin to see what was left, and found only a few hangars. But the memories are still there in the sighing grasses, and the ghosts of all the young people who called the place home. I wonder how many of our bunch are still alive?

Every November 11, I watch the Remembrance Day ceremony from Ottawa on TV and scan the old faces to see if I can recognize anyone. Then the bugle plays the *Last Post,* and I sit here and cry for those who did not come back. I hope to go back there in November one day, and once again march with my head up.

F4

Pearl Bordts –
née Klenman

I was in Winnipeg, Manitoba when the war started. I was originally from a farm in Saskatchewan. On a farm you had to be self-sufficient. There was no money, so farmers had to trade what food they had or play cards. They survived by helping each other out. We were eleven miles form the nearest town. It wasn't convenient to go in, as our options were horseback or cutter buggy. The Depression had left us very poor and the dust bowl and grasshoppers caused us to abandon our farm. The "dustbowl" was the name given to strong winds that ravaged the prairies, picked up our rich topsoils required for a good crop, and carried them away, leaving barren land.

The dustbowl was caused by a drought; dust was everywhere, and it was uncomfortably hot and dry. Usually you should leave the land fallow for a year or two between sowings, but people were sowing crops every year. As a result, the earth became not as firm as it should have been if it had been left to rejuvenate itself. A lot of people blamed the farmers for that, even though they had broken the land with such crude instruments and turned it into one of the world's finest bread-baskets. But, after a while they had over-farmed it. Outside of oats, flax and wheat they had nothing to alternate in the soil. They were still trying to get themselves organised for farming in Canada, and it was their first decent opportunity to make a life for themselves and their families. The same thing occurred in the U.S. It was very hot and they didn't get the rainfall they needed.

At the same time, grasshoppers came out of nowhere and were eating up everything. None of the trees had any leaves left on them. It was so bad that freight trains were being derailed by them! There was nothing a person could do to grow any food, there was no food left at all. The grasshoppers were the only ones that survived – in fact, they thrived! Whole families were leaving their homes every day, leaving their belongings behind. Thousands of men were forced to leave their homes, to travel across the country in search of work. My dad used to go and invite some of them in at night. My mum would give them supper and put them to sleep in the hayloft with blankets. The next morning my mum would give them breakfast to take with them. There was no hope, no jobs and no place for them to go. They just wandered. That's when we decided to leave because there was nothing left.

When we left Saskatchewan in 1937, the worst was behind us. My father had a car with cellophane windows and we loaded up all the furniture, the four kids and two adults. Things were also really bad when we first arrived in Winnipeg; everybody had to pitch in. There were a million things that kids could do. You had to fight to get an odd job to do. We only worked for pennies, but a penny saved was a penny earned. Everyone had to pitch in and help, that's what I learned. I worked at a café. At first, I was cleaning it, then I worked behind the counter. I had to cook and serve food. As well, I delivered groceries for the corner store. There was a lot for kids to do to help their family.

I was good in school, so I would play hooky. There was a huge farmers' market in Winnipeg on Fellbrooke Avenue and Main Street. I used to go there with friends early in the morning so we could go out into the fields and work until about ten o'clock or eleven o'clock at night. It helped provide for the family. We'd work all day and get a bag of potatoes or something. I loved it; I loved the fresh air and the country. It was not a matter of what you did, it was a matter of being fortunate enough to have something to do, some place to work. People now don't understand how hard people had to work in those days.

My father went on relief in Winnipeg. Everyone worked for that money, which was ten cents an hour. I had been given a present of a violin when I left Saskatchewan. One lesson cost a dollar, which was ten hours work for my father! Yet he continued to pay for my lessons. Just before he went overseas I had the privilege of playing in the school orchestra for him.

When the war was announced it was a great change. The war was an outlet for people, an answer to the chaos left in the wake of the Depression. Military bases and stations appeared across the country, Winnipeg had air bases with trainees from all over the Allied nations. Our house was always full of servicemen. All the girls would get together and get the boys to come in from Camp Shilo, where they were training for parachute duty. We used to meet at our home. All the neighbours would come out and clap for the men that were coming down to our house. Then we'd all go down to the beach. Every time we came home, the whole avenue was clapping for these fellows. They were about to go on their way overseas and seeing these men brought out a lot of good in people.

My father returned to the army as a sniper, and went back overseas in 1939. This was his second time in a war. He was in the First World War, in the cavalry – the 15th Light Horse in Saskatchewan. Two of my brothers followed him overseas the next year. The year after, that my older sister and I joined up and, when my younger sister joined, there were six of us in the service. My sister had gone to Toronto to work in a ship plant, and I worked at McDonnell Aircraft in Winnipeg making airplanes. After two years, she came home on leave and she asked me to go join the army with her. So away we went! We had two falsified identification cards with our name written in pencil on it. We got them from the post office. You could just put whatever age you wanted to on it. I was really fourteen, but very tall. (We didn't have a very good identification system at that time, so many people "upped" their age to get into the service. That's also how my younger sister got in!)

It seemed everyone was lying about their age. They were going overseas fighting and dying when they were only fifteen and sixteen years old! At that time, everybody wanted to do something. There were no jobs and nothing to do. Before the war, if you got paid a nickel, someone would undercut you and offer to work for four cents.

Some of the men didn't like their sisters to be in the army. Some people thought that women didn't have any other reason to be in the service besides looking for men! My father understood, though. I was to serve well and be proud. I think that, overall, women in the war conducted themselves very well.

One of the reasons I decided to enlist in the army was the knowledge of the danger that my family was in overseas. Most of my people didn't survive the Holocaust and died in the concentration camps. In 1884, my grandfather brought his immediate family, over to escape persecution and Russian domination, but the other relatives weren't as lucky. I had wanted so badly to go and help my family. The other reasons I enlisted include the fascination I had for my mother's stories of her nursing experiences in the First World War. Also, I wanted to get away and learn something different from what we were used to. It was really something then to get a job, to get a few dollars and clothes for yourself.

My siblings and I were all in the army, except for my one brother who was in the Canadian air force. I felt comfortable in the army because my father had been a member previously. He didn't speak much of his army experiences during the first war, but I know he was buried alive and wounded. The First World War took a terrible toll of life compared to the Second. In the First, between the fighting tactics and disease, out of one regiment there might have been four or five people survive.

I went off to Kitchener, Ontario, for basic training. I was very excited because of the adventures that awaited me. The military took up my whole life. But I enjoyed my time in the military. Every day was a learning day. I loved the army life; I loved the contact we had with people from all over the country. We also had women there from the United States, Poland, and all over the world. They came to train with us. It was an experience in itself.

One thing that stood out was that there were a few native women in the services. There was one from Winnipeg that I got to know very well. Being born in Indian Territory (my grandfather was the first white settler in Saskatchewan), I learned more about their way of life in the few years I was there than I would learn at any school. They are a beautiful race. I had many native friends and I still do to this day. They were always very quiet and took discipline well. If you asked them do something they would do it. Of the girls in the service, they'd do anything for this country-because they loved it.

The level of discipline in basic training was what I found the most challenging about adjusting to being in the services. But that's what made for a good soldier. I didn't find it difficult to adjust to this, though. It helped if you wanted to learn. Everyone was given their responsibilities and they had to be done. In active situations, everyone's lives could depend on it. Living up to those responsibilities started out of necessity, then you began to realise what it is like to be a part of something where everyone is depending on you, and you follow through!

There were some people who could not abide discipline. So they had to be weeded out. After all, this was wartime! I believe that discipline was the prime concern of any army or service then. Without discipline, you can't depend on that whole regiment or unit.

During our recreation times, I played baseball for the army team. There were many other hobbies they had available for service people, trying to find at least one thing each person would enjoy.

After basic training, I was sent to Woodstock, Ontario, for a motor transport driving course, and my sister was posted to Ottawa. In motor transport, we had to learn how to tear a vehicle apart and then put it back together again. We also had a lot of driving, in every type and class of vehicles – from cars to trucks of all sizes. That included a lot of dangerous cargo, but we were well trained, and it was an enjoyable job because we generally weren't in any danger.

When we were training for motor transport we went everywhere, down hills and valleys. We learned every vehicle that was on the road at that time. We learned every weight and specifications. My first incident with a gravel truck, I didn't know the weights on it. I never made it back. I said it had broken down, but it hadn't really. I couldn't go up a hill and I was afraid to go down a hill.

I eventually graduated from trucks into staff cars. We had a huge training camp in Debert, Nova Scotia and it was also a location for judging people who had gone AWOL. I would sometimes take an officer there in a staff car for a hearing. One time, while I was at Camp Debert waiting for the Padre to come out of a hearing, I was bored and decided to go up the tower that was part of the regular army's physical training course. I found out, much to my dismay, that the only way to get back down was by rope! I went flying down that rope and hurt both my hands.

Some people had other plans and didn't take their jobs in the military seriously. Everywhere we went, we had tests to take and requirements to meet, and some people didn't meet them. For myself, I worked hard and I was very proud to be the right marker in my company when I graduated.

After that, they offered an option as to whether graduates wanted to go active or remain in Canada. I still wanted to get overseas, so I volunteered for Halifax. I arrived in Halifax and had a week there before starting my courses. But they realised I was too young to go overseas! My mother had written the Commanding Officer saying that they mustn't let me go. Luckily, they didn't discharge or charge me!

There were a lot of ships in Halifax and I was still determined to go overseas. I wanted to see my family there. Besides, there weren't enough volunteers and people were dying like flies over there! So, I made arrangements with a sailor to stow away on a ship! It was really a crazy plan. I went to the appointment at eleven o'clock at night, with all my gear to get on the ship. When I got there, the ship had gone! But as it left the harbour it was torpedoed outside Halifax. I was very fortunate. No-one would have ever known I had been on it! I spent the rest of my military career in Canada.

There was not much interaction between the three services. They tended to stay to themselves. When Mackenzie King went overseas, there was a rift created between the services. I heard it started when he said, "Men of the navy and army, and gentlemen of the air force". Then, the air force people got to sleep on sheets, and the army and the navy didn't! There was always a sense of competition between the forces. But they all worked together when the chips were down.

We had also had the merchant marine in Halifax. Many of them were people who did not qualify physically to go into the armed services, but they took supplies and equipment over by boat to the people that needed them, and many of them died. They had no benefits, received little pay and they weren't even allowed in the service clubs in Halifax. They were very cheerful and they never complained. They were "real" servicemen. They will always be, in my mind, for their devotion to that duty and to make up for the fact that they weren't good enough to be paid[1] and be in the regular service in the country that they loved. They did a wonderful job. They are now finally being recognised.

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[1] Merchant sailors were paid some of them considerably more than naval ratings. They did not receive veterans' benefits, however, although the risk level was very high and they could not quit their jobs – the merchant marine was an essential industry.

In Halifax, just off Barrington Street there was the Cathedral Barracks, which was where we lived. It was winter and I had broken my arm, so I was put on light duties, working in the kitchen. I was getting things ready to make breakfast one morning. There was somebody who had been sneaking into the barracks and causing quite a ruckus by attacking women. I never thought anything of it before, but now I was standing alone in the kitchen. But I knew there was somebody in the basement of the barracks, who was *supposed* to be a guard. I was at the stove and suddenly had a terrible feeling. I had a pot of hot water in my hand, and I spun around to see a man ready to grab me! I dumped the pot of water on him and ran like the devil! I then realised he was the janitor! He was the one who had been causing the problems!

While I was in Halifax, I found out that they had brought in General Kurt Meyer with his wife and family. He was one of Germany's youngest generals. He had ordered the execution of Allied prisoners captured on D-Day.[2] One of those men was my brother-in-law's brother; he was the first to die, and they buried him in the grounds of a nun's school. General Meyer and his family were brought to the Dorchester Penitentiary and put into three cells instead of the one. I went down with two other girls to Dorchester Penitentiary just to see that young general. We wanted to go in but we were not allowed to, so we waited hoping that he would go into the exercise yard so that we could see him. I would know him anywhere. We just watched him when he appeared. He was still as arrogant as he always was. Unfortunately, he was only there for about a year or so.

When I was in Halifax serving, we had a rabbi, a Roman Catholic priest and Protestant minister. Every weekend, we had a service where one could go to one's own denominations. I tried them all. One was teaching one thing while the other was teaching something else, yet another was trying to get men and women to meet! I was disgusted by that, so instead I chose duty every Sunday! However, if someone does go into the line of fire it would be a comfort for them to have someone there who is of their own religion. I was born to Jewish parents. I found religion was a very important factor in the service then. If you did anything wrong it comes up like you wouldn't believe. Even though you work together and you sleep together.

One night my friends and I met some servicemen. Most of them were British, as Hong Kong had been liberated, and the soldiers were coming back from Asia after being Japanese prisoners. They were waiting in Halifax to go home. I loaded my car up with POWs that night and we took them around. They couldn't stop talking. We sat up all night talking and listening to their stories. I still correspond with them!

When V-E Day came they had terrible riots in Halifax. It was really bad. We were in the barracks and could hear people crashing into everything. People were breaking into the stores and everything was completely cleaned out, it was crazy. They had broken into the breweries and everyone was drunk. Everyone was throwing liquor all over the barrack walls. Some of us had decided we wanted to go see what was going on over there so we went over the fence! It was a horror story. We just went walking up and down the streets for a while and went back. The streets were covered in glass from the broken windows, left over from the looting. There were service men in fur coats! The next day all of Halifax seemed to be burning.

When we had cleaned up the city and replaced the windows, there was an explosion from the underground tunnels in the weapons hold.[3] All the windows were blown out again. I got a call to take an officer from Quebec out there to assess the damage. It was amazing; there

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[2] On June 8, 1944, soldiers of the 25th SS Panzer-Grenadier Regiment *(Hitlerjugend)*, commanded by Standartenführer Kurt Meyer, killed 23 Canadian prisoners of war captured in D-Day invasion. The murders took place at the Abbey of Ardenne, and the victims' bodies were not buried; some were even dragged into the road to be destroyed by passing vehicles. As the Normandy campaign wore on, soldiers of Meyer's division, the 12th SS Panzer Division, committed similar atrocities on several occasions. In December 1945, Brigadeführer Meyer was convicted of war crimes by a Canadian court martial and sentenced to death. Major-General Christopher Vokes, commander of the Canadian occupation forces in Europe, commuted the sentence to life imprisonment, and Meyer was paroled from Dorchester Penitentiary in September 1954.

were boats on dry rivers! Everything had been blown sky high. The barracks was gone and everywhere you went there were shells exploding. I took him back and that's when the evacuation started. That night, we evacuated the whole city of Halifax onto Citadel Hill. This included 1800 nuns, who at first did not want to go and had to be persuaded to leave their convent! The ammunition was burning and the authorities were afraid another explosion would happen. The tunnels went across the river to Dartmouth. Luckily, we were able to stop it and we didn't have another explosion. It was quite scary waiting there, and it was strange with so many people and everyone sleeping outside.

People had been living normally again until V-E Day and then it was utter chaos. People were throwing out furniture. It was an awful ending to a very tense time. Halifax had been on the verge of everything with the troops leaving from and arriving here. It was quite something to see. I met ship after ship after ship of returning troops, and we drivers drove them all over Nova Scotia.

At the end of the war, I was a private. I did make it to corporal, but they found out how old I was and sent me back down to private! I was in the Army for two and a half years before I was discharged. I wanted to be a nurse. When we all came home and were discharged, they told me I'd be at [Sigourney] Hospital in Winnipeg, but I had to be eighteen. I wasn't yet; I was so young when I went from civilian life to military life!

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3 The reference here is to an explosion in the magazine in Dartmouth, on the other side of the harbour from Halifax, which took place immediately after V-E Day and involved almost every uniformed person in the Halifax area in fighting the fire and protecting the public. Lacking both time and transportation, Haligonians were urged to take shelter in the lee of Citadel Hill, which had protected the southwestern part of the city from the most devastating effects of the great explosion of December 6, 1917.

Things had settled down after the war. Jobs were opening up and people were coming home. Things were looking up. I ran into a boy I had known earlier from school in Winnipeg. He asked me to come to Regina, so I moved and, after I got a job at a heating company, we were married. We moved to Chiliwack, British Columbia, and I joined the Militia[4], teaching weapons. (When I was younger my father had taken me hunting for squirrels and crows. It was just target practice, but it was one thing I knew I did well at. It also helped me in the army because I felt I knew I could defend myself). Still on his first job in 1955, my husband was killed, leaving me with three little kids to raise alone. So, I didn't get a chance to exercise my fingers on my music. I continued with the Militia and rose to the rank of captain. It was difficult raising the three children at the same time.

I also went over to Germany and worked for NATO in 1959 as a translator. I had learned to speak different languages from listening to my father. I speak German, Jewish, Latin, Romanian, Russian, Ukrainian – nine languages in total. If you can learn one language you can learn them all. I love languages. I hope people will travel to widen their outlook and learn the languages of the places they visit.

There were no prouder service people in this country than my family and I. It was sort of a heritage. I was always proud to be a Canadian and to have been able to help this country. I feel the way that my father and his father must have felt, to be allowed to come and live in this country and have the freedom that was offered to them. They learned to read and write using only the light of their little stove, which was all they had. They couldn't go to school because they had only their two hands to farm this country. We started out and we had a love for this country and we worked for it. We defended it with our lives.

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4 This would be during the Korean War at the earliest; the CWAC was demobilized in 1946 and reactivated in 1951.

Edna Drummond – née Dunlop

When the war started I was living at home on a farm outside of Almonte, Ontario. I had been working in home care, but my two brothers enlisted and I felt that I should do something to assist the war effort as well. I was determined to do my part, though I didn't know what to expect.

So in 1943 I wrote to my oldest brother, who was overseas with the army, and asked him which service I should join. "Definitely the air force," he said. I still don't know why he thought that would be best for me as all the forces were open to women by that time.

My mother didn't think too much of my plan though – of the ten children in my family, three of us were in the services. She wouldn't let me go to enlist in Almonte. So I went off to Toronto instead, and went to work in an ammunition factory, making tracer bullets for airplanes. It was very scary work: you filled the bullets with gunpowder by hand, and if you didn't do it right they could explode and blow up your finger or hand. The same factory also made bombs. Some of the people who worked on them had their hair turn green. I don't know why that happened, but I decided I didn't want to work on the bombs!

There weren't many safety precautions there. Electricity was one big concern: before we entered the factory for a shift we had to rub against a gold thing on the door that was supposed to take the static electricity out of our bodies. We couldn't wear anything metal, not even bobby pins in our hair.

After three months of this, I was tired of worrying about my safety and decided to go with my original plan, so I left and went to enlist. Basic training at Rockcliffe barracks in Ottawa was not what I expected. We had to do so much marching! You had to do everything perfectly and make no mistakes. Living in barracks was also quite different. I quickly learned to always get the top bunk, because that way the other girls couldn't sit on your bed when you had already made it. (If your bed wasn't perfect, you had to remake it.)

Because my mother and father lived so near, I was allowed to invite them to visit me during basic training. At the graduation ceremony, we got our diplomas and graduated to Leading Air Women (LAWs).

From Rockcliffe I was sent to Guelph for six weeks of chef training. I really enjoyed that course: we made a whole variety of foods, and then ate what we made. We all had to try what the others made too, whether it was good or bad. That was an incentive! Luckily, I already knew how to cook, so I didn't find the training difficult. There were dieticians working with us who showed us how to prepare our menus – that was very helpful, especially for the people who had never cooked before. We all became friends, and everyone helped one another. (We all felt bad for one man, who was put out of the course because for some unknown reason he was unable to smell. A sense of smell is essential to cooking.)

I made it through the class, passed the exam at the end, and was posted to Moncton, New Brunswick, as a chef. There were two stations in New Brunswick then, one out in the country and the other in the city.

I was on the country station; and as it happened, one of my brothers was serving with the air force on the city station.

I worked in several different messes there: the Sergeants' Mess, the Airmen's Mess and the Officers' Mess. I liked the airmen best, because of the casual atmosphere. I worked with six other chefs there, cooking for two thousand people. Can you imagine cooking steak for that many people? At mealtimes, they all poured in at once! It took an hour or more to get the long line of personnel all served and seated. At least we chefs didn't have to do the dishwashing, though – some civilians were hired from Moncton and they came in and washed the dishes, pots and pans.

Once in the Sergeants' Mess, I was told to make a cake. When I asked where the mixing equipment was, I was told, "Right there, use your hands." So I mixed up this big cake in a huge bowl with my hands! The Officers' Mess was quite different: it was more like a restaurant. The officers ordered their food individually, the chefs prepared what they requested, they were waited on, and they had to pay for their food.

At the mess, I had many people working with me. (I missed the dieticians, though – we had none in Moncton.) The kitchen staff was split equally between men and women, and we all managed to get along. We all had different jobs to do – some of us would do the soup and some would do the potatoes – but we would switch jobs every so often to prevent boredom. The officer in charge of the kitchen would put up a sheet of daily assignments, and we did whatever we were told that day. By rotating through the jobs it was kept fair. It was definitely a team: we all had to work together to make three meals a day, on time. I learned valuable lessons in teamwork.

One time, I made a pie for the Officers' Mess; and an officer came in to ask who had made the pie today. I thought, "Oh, no, what did I do?" But he relieved my anxiety by saying that it was the best pie he'd ever tasted, in a restaurant or anywhere. The other girl working with me was a bit envious, and after he left she said, rather tongue-in-cheek: "Well, you aren't making the pies tomorrow!"

The main difference between the messes was the quality of the food. The different ranks had different foods; and naturally, the officers had the best of it. We didn't cater to anyone's special dietary needs except theirs. I remember an officer once ordered "Adam and Eve on a raft."

I had no idea what he was talking about, and he had to explain it to me – it turned out to be poached eggs on toast! I found that quite amusing.

The sergeants didn't have special food, and they had to line up and come and get it. But there were only forty of them, so it was easier to prepare for serving them. There was a small hospital on my base but we didn't send any food over there as they prepared their own.

One time we were making a cake, and a fire drill was announced. So we had to drop everything, get out, and leave the cake to burn in the oven! (Unfortunately, we didn't always get back in time to prevent the food from burning.)

We had oil-burning stoves, low down so that we could lift the big pots on and off them. (The cooking equipment was all enormous: big bowls, blenders, pots, trays, etc. This meant that the men could do some tasks – such as stirring soup – better than we women could.

We were busy most of the time, and worked hard, usually twelve hours shifts, from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. I did find, though, that the people who worked in the offices and barracks looked down on the chefs. They thought our job was a low one, and considered themselves to be superior.

Our kitchen was big and we served good meals, though mostly it was pretty bland. Still, it was better than what was offered at many other stations. My brother would often phone me and ask what we were having for dinner. I'd tell him: steak, french fries, vegetables and dessert. He would say he was having macaroni and cheese, again, and would ask if he could come over. No sooner would I say "Okay," than he'd be coming in the back door!

After a year at Moncton, a few of us were sent to a small base (which has since closed) on Prince Edward Island. I liked it better there: the quarters were an improvement, and the station was smaller. There were fewer people to feed and the people were very friendly, which made it feel more comfortable. I stayed in P.E.I. for a year, and was there when the war ended. For us chefs, V-E Day was just like a normal day: there were no parties or days off, we didn't do anything to celebrate. Even in happy times, all the troops had to eat!

And of course, we chefs couldn't go home until all the other people had, because we had to keep feeding them. The war ended in August 1945, and I wasn't out of there until January 1946. That was the end of our war – we had to wait until everyone else had gone. You knew a base was closing when the cooks left!

I found it difficult to adjust to civilian life, and found that I really missed the military – I had enjoyed being with so many people, being part of group. I went to work cooking at the Almonte General Hospital from May until August 1946, when my boyfriend returned from England and we were married. I discovered that I didn't know how to cook for just two people any more! But I sure used my skills once I had six boys to cook for!

I think all of Canadian society became caught up in the war. In my part of the country, many people chose to join the services. It wasn't without personal cost either. My oldest brother (now ninety-four) had nightmares and flashbacks for years about being in Holland and Germany. The war changed his life, as it did for many others. He was once told that it would help him to find peace if he told his stories and got everything out in the open. When I had him home last September, he spoke more about his war experiences than he ever had.

Being in the air force made a big difference in my life. It helped me to communicate better, and made me much more independent. After the war, I wasn't afraid to travel and enjoyed going to places such as Washington, D.C., and learning about different countries. But what stands out most in my mind from my war experiences are the friends I made from all over Canada.

I'm surprised to find that people were more caring towards each other during the war than they are today, in peacetime. I do think Canadians should be more involved in the services and in taking care of their country. I think women in the services are better thought of now than they were – my mother never understood my decision to serve my country, and didn't think that women should be in the services at all. I wish my sons would understand why I went, as well: I've shared my experiences with them, but they don't seem to understand. But I went because I felt I should; and I was proud to receive my three medals for serving.

Janet Garvin – née Watt

Before the start of the war, I had worked for ten years or so with the T. Eaton Company in Montreal. In fact, I was at work there when war was announced in September 1939. Eaton's was very generous to all service personnel. It sent parcels to the men and women overseas, and sponsored a group of entertainers that went to all the military camps in and around Montreal, entertaining the troops with dancing and singing. They were exceptionally good – some of those people went on to become famous entertainers. (That show was similar to the navy entertainment called *You're In The Navy Now.*)

When war was first declared, my mother was in Scotland. She had gone over there aboard the HMCS *Athena* (which was the first ship to be sunk at the beginning of the war). My father told her to take the first ship back, but she couldn't manage to find passage, and didn't arrive home until October 1939. She wrote to my father and told him not to let any of the boys join up until she was back. But it was too late: my eldest brother had already joined the Black Watch. It was a very famous Highland regiment, with its own tartan and many Scottish traditions.

My other two brothers were younger, so they had to wait until they became of age. Then they joined up too. I was the last to join: in 1943 I went with a friend to the recruiting office. She had already checked out the army and the air force, and asked me to accompany her when she went to check out the navy as well. I just went to keep her company; but lo and behold, I ended up with two applications – one for me and one for my younger sister.

We filled them out, then started thinking. We felt it wasn't right for both of us to leave mother, because it meant her three sons and two daughters would all be in the war. So we decided that whoever received the first call from the navy would go. That was me, so I joined up. I was older than my sister but it was just the luck of the draw. The silly thing was, I really didn't want to go. Not at all! But I was already attested, so there wasn't anything I could do.

I went to Galt, Ontario, for basic training, which only lasted for the first two weeks. We were taught a bit about the navy and how to march, but they couldn't train me there for my chosen trade, which was post-office work. For that I had to go to another station. I remember that the officer in charge of us told me to "take the liberty boat" to my trade training. Well, I stood there outside the barracks for almost an hour, waiting for that Liberty Boat before I finally reported back to say that no such vehicle had passed by. Then it was explained to me that a Liberty Boat wasn't an actual boat at all, but a group of people all going out together in marching order! I never forgot that again.

After Galt I was transferred to Stadacona in Halifax – among the first draft of wrens sent there. I made several friends on the way east to Halifax. When we got there, all of us who had volunteered for postal service had to report to the Mail Officer. When we got to the office, a civilian secretary said that Lieutenant Lemieux would see us shortly.

That name sounded familiar. I asked if he was from Montréal, and the secretary said yes.

"Did he ever work at Eaton's, do you know?" I enquired.

"Yes, he did," was the reply.

I realized that I knew him and his father too! All the wrens were called into his office, two by two, leaving me all alone. Finally, I was told to go in and report to him – and we recognized each other right away. That officer gave me lots of encouragement and meeting a familiar face was comforting. It was nice to know when I felt homesick, that there was someone around I knew. It was Lieutenant Lemieux who got me going, working in the post office. (Later, he was appointed to go overseas. I wanted to go overseas too, but never had the chance.)

The post office was where all the mail for service personnel went first, before it was sent on across the rest of Canada. (We just dealt with incoming mail.) We wrens took over some of the work that men did there, such as sorting the mail, to free them up to go to the war. I worked in the section that sorted and forwarded the officers' mail, it was kept quite separate from the non-commissioned personnels' mail. It was a new section and at first I worked there alone, setting things up and getting them rolling. Then I was given two other staff members, so there were three of us in the office.

We didn't deal with outgoing mail, or the prisoner of war mail – that was sent elsewhere. We didn't handle the "lost in action" notices either – they were sent by telegraph, or delivered by hand.

Overall, I enjoyed the work – except for a few incidents! Our office was quite tiny, and at one point there was a terrible odour in it. They pulled up the baseboards, thinking that perhaps there was a dead mouse there. But there was nothing, and the smell went on for days. So, I said there was only one thing to do: we had to check every parcel. We found the cause: it was cheese. The smell was enough to kill you! We had to get rid of that parcel: we couldn't locate the officer it was addressed to, he must have been serving overseas. So the poor fellow didn't get his cheese. Normally we always held mail, but that one we had to dispose of!

I didn't mind any part of military life. The uniforms, for instance – the ones we were issued were made of a very rough material; so a lot of us had our going-out (or "date" outfits) made to measure for us out of a better material. We had a summer uniform of royal blue and a winter uniform in navy blue. (I kept mine until about a year ago, even though I couldn't get into it – I did wonder why I held on to it for so long. Then I removed all the buttons for keepsakes and gave it to the Salvation Army.)

Living in barracks was very nice. Our barracks was in a corner at the back of the annex, which was a building separate from the main building. We were private, quite privileged I guess. We were in an eight-bunk cabin, nice and cozy, – it was called "Cheery Chums." We all became very friendly: we were a clique, and we kept to ourselves. There was another building for the wrens that held our mess hall – the men were separate from us, we didn't eat with them.

Still, we weren't entirely without masculine company. There were no official matchmakers, but people managed to find dates through work and through dances. Someone would introduce you to somebody, and then you would meet somebody else. You would receive phone calls: "So-and-so gave me your name, and told me to be sure to call you when I was in port." So there was no shortage of men to dance with – our "dance cards" were always full!

One of the wrens married the executive officer of the *HMCS Heidi.* A few of us were invited to the ceremony on board the ship, and then to the big reception at the hotel. She came from a popular, socially prominent family, and her new husband was an officer, so it was all very posh. The captain of the dockyard was at the reception.

Another person who stands out in my memory is Sally, who was probably the best-looking wren. But she was forever getting into trouble and being confined to barracks. One time she wanted to go out, but had missed the Liberty Boat. As a Leading Wren, I could go out though, without waiting for the Liberty Boat.

So I said, "Come on, we'll go out the back door." Well, I was pushing against the door to open it when all of a sudden it flew open, and there stood "The Regulator." That was the name we gave to the NCOs assigned to check and make sure that everything was in order – that your uniform was correct if you were going out. So we just stood there, and she looked at the two of us, and then reported us. Sally was confined to barracks, because she was already in trouble – poor girl, she had to wash our barracks walls!

I got away with it, though: they didn't CB me because I was on the navy swim team and had to train. Before the war I'd been a sprinter – first at the YWCA, and then for the Knights of Columbus. When I first joined the navy it didn't have its own pool, so we all trained at the 'Y'. Eventually our team had its own pool at Stadacona, and we competed against each other, the army, the air force, and the civilians. I remember races at Cornwallis as well, and outdoors at Dartmouth. I would work during the day and then train in the evening.

I remember one incident when a Canadian ship caught fire in the Bedford Basin; and I believe they were going to blow it up, since it couldn't be put out any other way. So the plan was for us to be evacuated from our quarters, marched to the air force quarters, known as Pleasant Park and bedded down there for the night until the crisis was over.

The officer gave us our orders: if we heard a whistle, we would know that this was it and we should get dressed immediately and be ready to move. Well, a whistle did blow, and I was so frightened, thinking that this might be it. I don't recall getting dressed at all. But it turned out that the whistle blast really meant that the crisis was all over, and that we could march back to our barracks. The explosion had been averted – I believe they had been able to put the fire out with water after all.

Then the war ended, and there were the famous Halifax riots – or some such. Apparently the riots started because when the military personnel were given shore leave to celebrate, the whole town was closed up tight – the restaurants and dance halls were shut, as were the liquor and beer stores. So the men rebelled: they started breaking windows and looting stores. I have pictures of the rioters outside the warehouse where they sold beer.

When the riots started, I was at work and hadn't heard anything. But my brother was in port, ashore, and he saw what was happening. He came down to my office and said he was going to walk me back to the barracks. He said if anyone spoke to me, I should just answer and carry on – and not antagonize anyone! When I got to the gate, the duty guard said I had to remain there, which my brother said was fine with him too. For the next week or so, even after the riots were over, we wrens were escorted to and from the office.

During and after the riots, all service personnel were told that anyone found in possession of any loot would be severely reprimanded. The Military Police (MPs) went around searching. That was how we found ourselves in a sticky situation. After my brother had escorted me back to the barracks, I was called to the gate. I thought it was my brother back again, but it was a lad I knew from the swim team. He gave me a bottle of booze, saying that he didn't know what to do with it. I have no idea why he gave it to me!

Anyway, I went back to barracks, collected my friends, told them what had happened, and we all went into the shower stalls and drank the stuff neat, straight from the bottle. I didn't even like liquor!

It was only then that we found out the MPs were searching the barracks – and here was an empty bottle to dispose of! I thought, "What am I going to do? How can I get rid of it?" The office told me that the MPs were about to come through; so I put it in my handbag and hoped nobody would look there. Fortunately, they didn't; and after carrying it around guiltily for several days, I smuggled it into someone's garbage can.

I stayed in Halifax until 1946, even though all my friends were discharged in 1945. I thought they'd forgotten about me, because I had to request to be discharged! By then there were very few wrens left at Stadacona. Getting out became an urgent matter when I found out that my father had had an operation: my mother hadn't wanted me to know until he was out of the hospital, but my sister wrote to me about it thinking that my mother had already told me. Luckily, it turned out not to be a major thing; but I felt it was at the time, and

I also felt I'd been in quite long enough. The work was becoming tedious. So I finally managed to get out in February 1946.

By then, I had risen to the rank of Leading Wren. When I was discharged, one captain said to me: "I see here that you were recommended three times to go for officer training. Why didn't you accept?"

"Well, all my friends were Leading Wrens, and I didn't want to leave them," I replied. "I preferred to stay with my friends." Friendship was important to me then, and now.

Back at home, I decided to go back to work at Eaton's. I left briefly when I got married, then went back and stayed until I retired. Eaton's was extremely good to its employees. At one point, in September of 1946, there was a big dinner for all of the employees who had been in the services. I represented the Women's Division, and made a speech thanking everybody there for what they had done for the service personnel during the war.

I should also mention that the Department of Veterans Affairs gave war veterans a number of options. For example, the Land Act would give you a few acres of land if you were building a new home outside the city. (My brother did this: he got two acres of land about thirty miles from Montreal.) Anybody could apply for this. Houses were also built for veterans within the city. Depending on the circumstances of your family, you could get a two- or three-bedroom home; and after a certain number of years, you could buy it. That's what my brother-in-law did.

I know it sounds horrible, but I actually had a very good time during the war. I enjoyed my work, and did it with pride. But there were some sad times too: one of my brothers was killed overseas, and one was wounded. There were both in the Black Watch. My youngest brother, who was in the navy, is the only one still alive. He was also injured, and still bears the scars.

Serving in the navy taught me discipline and people skills, especially how to get along with other people. I'm glad that I had the experience – I wouldn't have missed it. I remember, when the call first came, confessing to my mother that I didn't really want to be in the navy. She said, "If I was your age and in your shoes, I would join for the experience of meeting people and broadening my horizons." That was very true: although Halifax wasn't really that far, I did broaden my horizons in so many other ways.

Thérèse 'Terry' Forsyth –
née Hebert

I grew up in Lancaster, Ontario, in the 1920s and 1930s, with a mother, father, four sisters, cats and a dog. Our life was pretty normal. We had just survived the Great Depression, but to a teenager that was no big deal. After high school, I worked at the ammunition plant in Brownsburg, Quebec, and then at the post office back in Lancaster.

When England declared war on Germany in September 1939, Canada and all the other Commonwealth countries had to do their share. All the ammunition plants in Canada went into full swing, trying to meet production needs. The world watched as Germany took Austria, Czechoslovakia and then Poland. In July 1942, I applied and was accepted into the Royal Canadian Air Force, Women's Division, as a postal clerk. I went to Toronto for my six weeks of basic training – a very trying experience. I was terribly homesick, the weather was unbearably hot, and we did so much marching that my feet were sore.

(Two of my sisters also joined up, both working in Ottawa. My youngest sister, Marie Rose, joined CWAC, and worked as secretary to the CO of the Royal Canadian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers.

She volunteered for the Pacific theatre, but the war ended before she could leave Canada. And another sister, Cecile, was lured away from Cornwall, Ontario, by recruiting personnel sent to hire office workers for National Defence in Ottawa. She spent some time in London, Ontario, and then ended up back in Ottawa. She wound up working for DND for 26 years.)

I was posted to No. 12 Service Flying Training School (SFTS) in Brandon, Manitoba, as a postal clerk; but homesickness followed me. From there it was back to Montreal, where I took a six-month course at No. 1 Wireless School, learning Morse code and how to send and receive messages by Aldis lamp, flags and wireless. Then I was stationed at No. 14 SFTS in Aylmer, Ontario – a training school where airmen received their "wings" when they graduated. As wireless operators, our job was to keep in contact with the planes while they flew, day or night, and log all communications.

In June 1944, I was posted overseas to No. 6 Group Headquarters, Canadian Bomber Command, in Yorkshire, England. The HQ was housed at Allerton Castle, but we were billeted in Nissen huts – they were made of corrugated metal, so they were hot as the devil in the summer and cold as ice in the winter. Each hut contained sixteen cots and a toilet, in a separate little room. There was a small stove in the centre where we all gathered at night to have a cup of tea in our cozy government-issue flannelette pyjamas. Of course we had no bath, only showers. Most of our free time was spent doing laundry, ironing, and polishing shoes. I sometimes wonder how we did it, especially the men.

At the castle were the operations rooms, where the highest officers made planning and strategy decisions. All communications took place by Telex, wireless and telephone between headquarters and eleven satellite stations. Our job as Wireless Operators, Ground (WOGs) was to record every message in Morse code, for the Intelligence people to decode them. We worked around the clock, three eight-hour shifts, on what was called "double daylight savings summer time" – in order to add two more hours to the day. Other than our wireless section and Telex in the basement, the rest of the castle was off limits. (We were naïve enough to believe that the castle was haunted, so there wasn't too much prowling – especially on the night shift!)

Everything was written down – whatever was said in the aircraft cockpits, leaving or landing, was recorded. I remember when the big push was on. Hundreds of bombers were taking off and landing, and I was parked under a tree in a camouflaged vehicle to monitor the aircraft. The pilots didn't even know that somebody was listening in. They weren't allowed to talk; everything had to be transmitted in Morse code, in complete silence, with not a word spoken. There was somebody listening in at all times.

Another important job was transmitting coded messages that had to go out every hour, on the hour. For downed airmen or the underground, it was crucial that they had a constant signal to home in on; so for the planning and operation of missions, it was important that the signals always came at the same time, the same frequency. Secrecy was of the utmost importance.

We would get so hungry, especially working the 11 p.m. – 7 a.m. shift. I remember how we'd rush over to the mess hall, wanting some Spam so badly – we just craved a meat sandwich – and there wasn't any. We frequently just had peanut butter and jam – I tell you, I got so turned off peanut butter and jam. To this day, I can't stand it. The food was okay in the daytime, though we never had fresh eggs – just powdered. As for the milk, well, we were never too sure just how fresh it was.

Even during the war, it wasn't all work and no play: we were given a nine-day leave every three months. Travel in England or Scotland, by bus or by train, was free for serving military personnel, as long as you wore your uniform and had a pass. (You had to pay to go to Ireland, though.) We were allowed to wear our civilian clothes while we were off duty.

A great many English families opened their homes to the soldiers, free of charge. Several times I went to Bournemouth and stayed with a high-society family – whose name I won't mention! They were very well off and had a beautiful house. Today, I guess you would call it a bed-and-breakfast – we could take a room there, and have our meals with the family in the dining room. The lady, her husband and sometimes their son and daughter would play host to us.

Then, some time after the war, someone told me that the entire family had actually been spies for the Germans. Imagine that! I couldn't believe it – I hoped it was only a rumour, and not really true. But the Germans were quite wily enough to infiltrate some of these "homes away from home" to collect information from the unsuspecting guests. Of course, none of us ever talked about our work – we had all been briefed about that. Secrecy was an integral part of our military life. Nevertheless, it was still quite a shock to find out that these nice people might have been spies! Never would you have thought it.

At the base there was a YMCA hut where one could play cards, bingo or watch an occasional movie. I was also active in sports, and swam and played basketball, softball and badminton when possible. In the small village where I had grown up, we'd hadn't any organized school sports of any kind, not even in high school. So I thoroughly enjoyed the teamwork and camaraderie I found in sports.

The British greeted the Canadians serving in England with open arms – they were very happy to have us there to lend a hand. Once I was travelling with a friend in Harrowgate, Yorkshire, when we became lost. We were standing on a corner when a lady came up to us and asked us if we were lost. When we said we were, she invited us to her house. (As I said, many people would open their homes to soldiers at that time.) Mrs. Thompson and I immediately became friends, and I stayed there several times afterwards.

(After the war ended in 1945, I was invited to the wedding of her daughter Dorothy, who had served in the British air force, as had her son. Mrs. Thompson, the mother, has since died; but I still correspond with Dorothy. A few years ago, I went over to visit her with my daughter Nancy. We stayed at her house, and even visited Allerton Castle – tea was served where I was once posted during the war. What a journey down memory lane! It was wonderful.)

At No. 6 Group Headquarters, our highest-ranking female officer was our squadron leader, who was a flight officer and a captain. The women had access to the same courses as the men – in fact, women were favoured for office work and the like, so as to free up the men to go to the front. Women didn't serve at the front. That was fine by me; I wouldn't have wanted to go there.

Women and men also had the same medicals. The most embarrassing part of the medicals was when you arrived in England, and you had to be inspected for lice or other signs of communicable diseases. Standing there, stark naked, while a male doctor (there were hardly any female doctors) checked you over was the most degrading thing I ever went through! In retrospect, I know it was a necessary requirement... but humiliating, nevertheless.

After V-E Day, naturally everyone wanted to get home. By chance, it was V-J Day when I arrived in Lachine, Quebec. Every serviceman and servicewoman was given a month's leave, after which we had to report back to be discharged. The process took a few days; and believe it or not, I caught hair lice while I was at CFB Rockcliffe! Of course, they could never get those thick grey woollen blankets cleaned in between all the people who used them briefly.

Well, that was bad enough; but when I went back home, didn't I pass the lice on to my mother! I suppose that happened when I was hugging her. We were all so mortified. It was bad enough that I had a hard time speaking French to her after not having spoken my mother tongue in nearly eighteen months, but to give her hair lice! The dear old soul was in her seventies at the time, and wore her long white hair in a bun. Can you imagine doing that to your poor mother? I felt just terrible.

Everyone was looking forward to getting a job. On our discharges, we received what were called "Re-Establishment Credits." Mine came to 389 dollars, and I bought a wood stove for my mother and a bedroom set for myself. But ten years later I gave that money back, because my husband and I wanted to build a house. We eventually used the credit through the Department of Veterans Affairs. DVA has always been very good to us vets, even to this day.

After my discharge, I worked at the Unemployment Insurance Office and really enjoyed it. However, I had to resign when I got married. That's how it was in those days: if you got married, you had to resign from your job. That was automatic. Thank God times have changed.

My RCAF service was a fulfilling and exciting time, and I would highly recommend the military life to anyone. In fact, my sons Bill and Andrew were in the militia as teenagers. They thoroughly enjoyed it and benefited greatly from their cadet training. I enjoyed the camaraderie, the esprit de corps and the discipline that are so lacking today.

Barbara Morton –
née Boose

When the war started I was just entering my fourth year of high school in Hamilton, Ontario. My life was quiet: I lived with my parents, watched high school football games, sang in the church choir on Sundays, helped out with my younger brother's Cub Pack after school, and went to the pictures on Saturday afternoons with my cousin. At first, nothing changed for me when the war started. Two of my cousins served in the RCAF overseas, one as a gunner and the other in aircraft maintenance. Both returned safely.

I heard the news broadcasts on the radio, but the war only began to seem real when men in uniform began to appear in the streets in ever-increasing numbers. I spent the summers of 1940 and 1941 at our cottage on Lake Erie; and on Saturday nights in Port Dover I would see airmen from the nearby Service Flying Training School (SFTS) at Dunnville.

I was eighteen and had just graduated from high school in July 1941 when I heard that the government had approved the formation of the Canadian Women's Auxiliary Air Force. The call went out for recruits for CWAAF. The idea of enlisting appealed to me – the air force more than the navy or army. At that time, though, the minimum recruiting age was twenty-one. So I put the idea on the back burner and took a job in the Canadian Westinghouse factory, and a night school course in drafting.

Then early in 1942, the age for enlisting was lowered to nineteen. My parents didn't try to discourage me from joining up. My father had been a transport driver in France in the First World War, so I guess he understood. My mother's only concern was that I would get in, find I didn't like it, and not be able to get out. But she need not have worried; I joined forces with a friend and we applied together, were accepted and sworn in on February 16, 1942. (By that time, the name had been changed to RCAF, Women's Division.)

Our basic training was in Toronto; and in the first six months I had several different jobs. There were only eight trades available at that time, and I was only qualified for General Duties. My first posting was to the SFTS at Hagersville, Ontario. There I worked in the record room of the control tower, looking after the Trainee Pilot's log books. After ten days, four of us were sent to Air Force Headquarters in Ottawa. For two and a half months I worked in the Map Section, running errands and filing maps. Then I was posted to the Bombing and Gunnery School at Jarvis, working as a waitress for the Air Cadet Officers on the two-week training course. Then I was put to work in the Ammo Room, preparing the drums and belts of bullets for the trainee gunners.

In one month, there were two plane crashes there. The first involved a single aircraft, and four men were killed – the pilot, the rigger and the two trainee gunners. I had given them their ammo just before they went up; and I can still see the young airmen in my mind's eye. In the second crash, two planes on bombing practice collided and six men were killed – two pilots, two riggers and two trainee bombers, one of them a New Zealander. I didn't soon forget seeing six flag-draped coffins lined up in church at the funeral parade, and hearing the firing party's salute. The five Canadians were sent home by rail for burial, and the New Zealander was buried in the churchyard in Jarvis.

At the end of August 1942, I was posted to Eastern Air Command HQ in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Up to that time I had never been any farther away from home than Ottawa. I was quartered at Y Depot, and travelled back and forth to work at HQ. We worked six-day shifts of different hours: 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., 4 p.m. to midnight, midnight to 8 a.m. We had two days off between shifts, and each shift lived together in one barrack room.

One night we were in the mess hall when the duty cook asked us to help get food ready for some unexpected visitors. It seemed a boatload of airmen was about to leave for overseas when they realized that the ship they were put on had just brought German POWs to Canada, and hadn't yet been cleaned. The airmen refused to go aboard until it was cleaned, and returned to Y Depot for dinner. We heard some wild stories from them about the bugs.

In May 1943, some of us were posted to No. 1 Group Headquarters in St. John's, Newfoundland. When I arrived, I was surprised to see that a neighbour from Hamilton was stationed there too. It was nice to meet someone from home. At that time Newfoundland was considered "overseas," so we had a CAPO address: this was a central point where mail for overseas personnel was sent, to be distributed to the various destinations. This was to keep secret where the various troops were stationed – our mail home was censored too. We had blackouts as well, since the Battle of the Atlantic was still being waged.

There were no barracks ready for us at first, so for two months we were quartered at Torbay Airport before moving into our new barracks on the outskirts of St. John's. We worked at the American base of Fort Pepperrell, on the shore of Quidi Vidi Lake, in the Information Centre – known in the RCAF as the Filter Room. Again, we worked in shifts.

Sometimes between morning and evening shifts, we would hike over to the ocean near Quidi Vidi and climb among the rocks. One day, we met some fishermen out in dories, catching squid for bait. They took some of us out and showed us how to catch cod with a straight fishing line and a piece of squid – this was called squid jigging. They gave us one of the cod; and two girls found a piece of fence rail, put it through the gills of the fish and carried it on their shoulders back to barracks, with the tail of the fish dragging in the road. We gave it to the Sergeant's Mess. I still regret that the film in my camera was all used up and I wasn't able to take a picture of that adventure.

Later in 1943, bombers built in the United States were being ferried over to England – some through Goose Bay in Labrador, and others by way of Gander. One particular night when I was on duty, they started taking off from Gander at midnight – one every two minutes until 7 a.m. I was on the line with the radar station on the coast near Gander, and I think they picked up every one as it took off and tracked it for 150 miles out over the ocean. That was certainly a night to remember.

In early 1944, the Aircraft Detection Corps (ADC) was organized in Newfoundland. This was a corps of civilian spotters who reported aircraft sightings to our department. There were very few direct phone lines, so most reports came in by telegram. We had a small switchboard to receive these reports and match up the information with our recorded flight tracks. I was assigned to this switchboard, and shortly afterwards promoted to Corporal. We handled sightings other than aircraft: once a spotter on the coast reported finding a raft with four bodies on board.

By the time the war ended, we had been posted back to EAC HQ in Halifax. The night shift was on duty when the news came through; and next morning, we went on duty for our last day shift. Unfortunately, all the sailors on ships in the harbour had been given shore leave; but when they got into town, nothing was open – no theatres, no restaurants, nothing for them to do. So they got overexcited and went on the rampage. Riots started – windows were smashed, stores looted, etc. and the downtown area was declared out of bounds to all air force personnel.

So we had to go straight back to barracks that evening for our station's own celebration. We weren't allowed to go off the station in uniform; but five of us girls obtained permission to go off base in civilian clothes, as long as we stayed away from downtown. We got a picnic lunch from the mess hall and headed out to Northwest Arm for the day.

I had applied for an immediate discharge on compassionate grounds: my father had passed away in March 1945, and since my brother was only thirteen I figured my mother needed me at home. My discharge came through a week after V-E Day. I had no problem with the transition back to civilian life, though I didn't really know what I wanted to do. I considered going into drafting; but the army career counsellor persuaded me to take a course in business administration and cost accounting through Veterans Affairs. I had always declared that I would never work in an office, and I refused to take shorthand. But I liked working with figures, so I ended up working on payroll.

For me, serving in the air force was the experience of a lifetime – I wouldn't have missed it for anything. I think my fondest memories are of the girls I lived and worked with. Even though we were engaged in a serious business, we had fun together and formed many long-lasting friendships. At my first reunion in Vancouver in 1976, I met several of the girls who had been on my shift in Newfoundland – I hadn't had any contact with them in thirty-five years! I also saw, for the first time, a recruiting film for women that I remembered being shot at Jarvis back in 1942. I believe it was called ***They Serve That Men May Fly***, and it included some footage of us at work. I've been to seven reunions since, and am looking forward to Edmonton in 2001.

Reta M. Gudbranson –

née Moore

When the war started I was still in school, living with my parents on a farm outside the little town of Maniwaki, Quebec. I had four siblings, all brothers. One of them changed his birth certificate to add a few years to his age, and was in the services for a couple of months. But then all the new recruits were listed in the newspaper, and my parents phoned in a panic to see if it was their young son. So his service term was short-lived; he had to pack up his duds and go home.

The older members of our community seemed to be aware that war was brewing. They had many memories of the First World War (I remember their collections of old medals), and they seemed to think the country was heading in that direction. Then we learned from the radio and the daily paper that war had indeed been declared – there was full coverage that evening. Germany's invasion of Poland brought it all home, and the older people began to recount some of the old tragedies. It had only been twenty-one years since the last war, so it was easy even for us younger people to relate to what was happening.

I had started my career teaching at the little country school in our community. At that time, the wage was 30 dollars a month and you paid

10 dollars of that for room and board. So when I was offered 40 dollars a month to teach in Kazabazua the following year, I didn't hesitate for a minute. During this time I began to study for the Civil Service exam. I wrote it in June, passed and moved to Ottawa to work. I loved life in the city, and that summer Ottawa was buzzing with the war effort. I'd been collecting information on the services for some time, so this had a great influence on me. I had broken my arm the previous winter; but as soon as it was healed, I joined the Canadian Women's Army Corps.

I was sent to Kingston for initiation, then to Kitchener for basic training, and from there to Toronto for advanced training. At North Toronto Vocational Training Centre we were all taught the fundamentals of office protocol to prepare us for our future careers in the Armed Services. After that, we were all posted out to various locations – wherever the vacancies were.

I ended up back in Ottawa, working for the Engineering Department in the Army Building, on what is now NDHQ on Colonel By Drive. I found our work very interesting: we recorded the progress of any building projects Defence was involved with, such as hospitals, barracks, or Bailey bridges in Europe. It was quite a thrill to know that you had some small part in the progress of the war.

I stayed with that job until peace was declared in Europe. But despite the enthusiasm of the moment, things were still unsettled – the war with Japan was still on, and there were still prisoners over there. So though we joined the crowds and celebrated in the main streets of Ottawa, something was still missing.

After V-E Day, Canada started sending servicewomen over to Europe to replace some of the men, so they could go home – especially men who were married, or who had been over there for a long time. (There was a point system: the longer you'd been overseas, the sooner you were sent home.) A lot of women had signed up for overseas duties at first, but they were no longer interested because their husbands or boyfriends were coming home. That gave some of us younger ones our opportunity. We were well scrutinized before being chosen, and had to have unblemished records.

I was one of the lucky ones. We took our embarkation leave, packed our kit bags, boarded the *Aquitania* and went zig-zagging all the way to England, to avoid any Japanese torpedos. Were we afraid? Of course not! We were seasoned soldiers, or so we thought. We were definitely brave at heart and determined to serve to the end.

In England, we were billeted in Aldershot – a venerable old military barracks that lacked the facilities we were used to in Canada. Our new accommodations included palliasses, or straw mattresses, for sleeping on – our first introduction to them was when we were given a pile of straw dumped in the middle of the floor, a rectangular bag, and instructions on how to fill it. Thank goodness allergies were almost unknown then, and our tired young bodies soon adjusted. Needless to say, at this point I found myself wondering why I had joined the services!

While we were waiting to be posted, the Americans dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the war was truly over. The celebrating that night took on a new dimension! Mild and Bitters (two kinds of English beer) were served in milk jugs in the mess hall. Maybe the lights didn't go on again all over the world; but it was certainly brighter in our corner of it for the first time in five years. From then on, it was adventure with a light heart for us servicepeople.

While we were in England, we had the opportunity to take organized field trips to various parts of the countryside. We also had some leave before being posted, and several of us travelled up to Scotland, spending most of our time in Edinburgh. There was so much to see, even just walking around!

My first posting was to Germany: I was attached to Second Echelon in Lemgo, a holding unit for men who were waiting to be repatriated. We were quite restricted in our movements, but did have some opportunities for supervised trips. One that stands out in my mind more than any other was to the concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen. This was in the fall of 1945, when the camp had only been liberated for a short time, and the barracks were still filled with former prisoners who had not yet been sent home.

We had been advised to bring some gifts of soap, food, etc. I remember we gave a sandwich to one little boy, about nine years old. He hid it behind his back, in his shirt, and when he thought no one was looking he would take a bite – then hide it again. Whenever I see those documentaries about camp survivors, I always wonder if he might be one of them. The awful ravages of the prison camp were still quite evident on the former prisoners. But that's another story, one that has already been told, and I couldn't do justice to it.

In the winter, I went to Amsterdam for a holiday with a CWAC friend. The Dutch people were celebrating their first Christmas as free people for many years, so it was a joyous occasion – and because it was the Canadians who had liberated them, we were treated like royalty.

I was able to live high on the hog all the time I was on the Continent, off the spoils of cigarettes! We had been advised before leaving England to order our full allotment of cigarettes every month, even if we didn't smoke, so we'd be able to barter with them. (The Imperial Tobacco Company, back in Canada, sent over a carton of cigarettes a month to Canadian servicepeople for only a dollar, which was deducted from our pay.) Being a nonsmoker, I lived pretty well – I paid for my Amsterdam holiday, hotel accommodations and everything. I even had my hair permed for ten cigarettes.

In the new year, Lemgo camp was closed and Second Echelon moved to Oldenburg. There again we weren't allowed to move around very freely, but we had taxi service on request if we wanted to go anyplace. And again there were field trips and activities at our disposal – I saw my first opera, *Carmen*, in Hamburg.

In Oldenburg we were billeted in a comfortable old house with three floors, and ate and slept there. This was an improvement on Lemgo, which was an old Air Base and very military. There were various other military units in the vicinity, who were all happy to entertain us; so we had quite an active social life. One such camp was No. 2 Detention Camp, where Eddie Gudbranson, my future husband, was stationed. We became friends, and would meet up again later in Britain, while waiting for passage back to Canada.

There were also all kinds of opportunities on the weekends to travel around Germany and see the countryside. On the whole, the Germans were very nice to us; but once in while, you would see in their eyes that we were not their favourite people. That was quite understandable: so much was still fresh in their minds. I didn't have any problems accepting them; they only did what we did, they supported their country. I'm sure the average German had no idea of the atrocities that were committed.

Once I went for a two-week holiday to the Bad Hartzburg mountains with a CWAC friend. The mountains were spectacular, but provided little entertainment! One day we were browsing around a village and went into the little general store. The German owner spied my red sweater under my army-issue jacket, and decided he desperately wanted it for his girlfriend – he offered me anything in the store for it. Well, there wasn't much I could carry with me easily... but after a lot of contemplation, I spied a garnet ring. I had no idea of its value but it would certainly be easy to carry. So we made the trade; and I still wear the ring. It turned out to be a lovely semi-precious keepsake, and years later I had it reset.

By this time, I had become a seasoned traveller – all the while living off the revenue of tobacco! There were other odd things we could trade as well as cigarettes, such as candies, gum and even underwear. (Our army-issue knickers would last forever, I'm sure, and my grandmother would have treasured them – but even in the forties, who wanted panties that reached halfway to the knee?) I also had some other little personal items that I hesitate to mention, but which had great bargaining power too. And there were always gallant men around to help us barter, so we could maintain the appearance of a lady while living off our spoils!

So when the opportunity came to go to Paris, I filled my kit bag full of goodies I didn't need any more and off I flew. Paris was like no other place in the world, or so it appeared to us young people at that time. The St. James D'Albany hotel was reserved for visiting service people, and I'm sure it was the best in the city. There was a whole crowd of us young military personnel – English, American and Canadian – and we took in all the sights.

We visited the Follies Bergeres, the Moulin Rouge, Notre Dame cathedral, Fontainebleau and many other places of interest. Just walking down the street was an adventure! We travelled on the Métro, the French underground, and ate sticks of French bread sold on the streets. I have never tasted bread so good, before or after! In the ten days we were there, we were never bored for a moment.

On our way back to Oldenburg by train, a little snow fell; and our hotel in Belgium was so cold we had to wear our gloves to bed. But we had been to Paris, so it was all worth it!

At last, though, our tour of service in Germany was over and it was time to go home. I was able to turn the remainder of my cigarettes into English pounds, so I had some pocket money when I arrived back in Britain. While waiting for embarkation there, we travelled around some more: we visited Edinburgh again, and took a short trek over to Belfast in Ireland. I met Eddie Gudbranson again there, who (along with many friends) was still chasing me at that point. But who could make a quick decision, when there were so many good-looking young soldiers around?!

I sailed back to Canada on the *Isle de France.* When we got back to Canada, CWAC was being disbanded. So after disembarkation leave and being officially discharged, the next step was looking for employment. We had VP (Veteran's Preference) status, and were presented with a choice of locations. I chose Ottawa, and my credentials were forwarded to potential employers. When I walked into the Continental Paper Company for an interview, the gentleman looked at me and said, "You're hired." I stayed there until I married Eddie a year later. (We raised two daughters, and now have two granddaughters and a grandson.)

So I would say that on the whole, society regarded us with esteem. Even in social life, as soon as people know I'm a veteran, it's an instant friendship. Back then, though, I don't remember giving much thought to how people viewed us – we just took life in our stride, being much too busy to worry about such incidentals! We lived our lives to the fullest, and I think many people on civvy street envied us our experience.

My service years taught me valuable skills that would be useful all my life. I don't know what kind of a person I would have been if I hadn't been in the services; but I've discussed this period of our lives with other veterans many times, and we always agree that having been involved made us better people – more understanding and compassionate.

After I retired I attended several CWAC reunions in Toronto, hoping I'd meet some of my old cronies from the past. Unfortunately I didn't, though I did make a lot of new friends. Sadly, the last year might be the final reunion for that group: the women who organize the events are now seniors, and there's just too much work involved.

It saddens me too when I read some of the coverage the military gets in the newspapers, though of course it's an entirely different situation when your country is at war. Peacekeeping in some countries seems futile at times, as well as stressful for all concerned. But there is no turning back, and we must keep trying.

I understand that National Defence is now in the process of erecting a military monument in Kitchener, on the site of the old barracks where a lot of us took our Basic Training. I believe they hope to have it completed in time for Remembrance Day 2000, in November, and to hold a reunion and dedication there.

I went back to the Continent in 1994, when my husband's former regiment (the British Columbia) organized a battle tour. We followed the route they took during the war: where they were stationed in England, where they were trained and billeted, and where they invaded Nazi-occupied France and Holland. That was a wonderful experience. The Europeans organized all sorts of festivities for us. At a welcome luncheon in Maizieres, France, the mayor expressed his hope that the next time they would be able to take care of their own problems – but he hoped there would never be a "next time."

And in a little town in Belgium, one of the locals asked me who the group was. I told him we were Canadian veterans; and he said, "We are glad to welcome you this morning, but not nearly as happy as we were to see you fifty years ago!"

Of course, we visited all the cemeteries – many people had gone on the tour especially to visit someone's grave. Then we spent a whole day at Normandy Beach. That was a daunting experience. The memories of D-Day still hung in the air for many of us; and walking along the beach, you just wanted to give homage to those brave people who were in that conflict.

Jessie Currie

At the start of the Second World War, I was nineteen years old and lived with my parents in the county of Surrey, in England. My dad had been with the Royal Navy in the First World War, and had had an awful experience. During the Battle of Jutland, the ship his brother was on was torpedoed and went down. My father was right there on the deck of another ship, but there was nothing he could do – he could only watch helplessly.

When war was announced, my father was too old to be conscripted; but he still sold the country inn he was running and joined up to fight. This time he joined the Merchant Navy. During the whole war we were only able to see him twice. My brother George also joined, but he was with the Royal Navy. This left my mother, my aunt and I to spend the war together.

The war seemed to start off very slowly. The first time it seemed real to us was when our parish priest was killed. He had been away in London visiting the Boys' Club, and a bomb was dropped on the club during a raid. That's when it hit home to us that we were at war.

Mother was conscripted and sent into munitions, which I didn't think was fair as she was not in good health. The husband of one of my aunts was sent to munitions too, and he had been gassed in the First World War. My aunt, who was in her forties, was also conscripted and sent to work managing a bakery. She quite liked it, though it wasn't open every day – at that time, stores were only open when there was something to sell.

When a store did open, everyone would rush to queue for the goods. Food was scarce, and we were rationed quite severely. Butter, margarine, tea – we were only allowed two ounces a week. There was a queue for potatoes and bread. It seemed we had potatoes and milk for dinner every night for six years. Many people chose to grow their own vegetables. You really had to.

Clothes were rationed too. You only had thirty coupons for a year, and a coat would use up nearly all of them. Mother and I both had short suede ankle boots that we wore every day, all through the war. We didn't often have proper stockings either, although we could sometimes get lisle stockings. But you could buy things like petrol or film on the black market- if you had the money.

I didn't join the wrens, as that would have left my mother alone: she was often ill, and needed someone with her while my father was away. But I did join the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS), and went to work with the fire service. We worked eight-hour shifts, taking messages from the coast alerting us of enemy action. When we received the call that German planes had been spotted coming over, we got on the phones to relay the message to the Air Raid Wardens. There was only five minutes notice to tell people to get into their bomb shelters.

When you heard the horrible noise of the air raid sirens, you ran for shelter. In London, people used the Tubes – the subways – as bomb shelters, and many slept on the platforms. Our shelter was under the stairs, and a typical day would start with us crawling out from under there. I rarely slept in a bed during the war.

At the start of the war, the German bombers mainly targeted the docks, where the troops were coming in. But then they began to target military installations and hospitals, and soon they were bombing indiscriminately. The enemy bombing raids would come over in waves, crossing from the south coast and into London to drop bombs. Where we lived, just outside London, nine bombs were once dropped in one day. The bombs turned things into rubble and killed lots of women and children. It was very painful. Coming home from work on my bike one day, I was strafed by a German bomber and ended up in a ditch – fortunately unhurt.

In 1944, the Germans started using unmanned "buzz bombs." Those were very scary: once their engines stopped, they would just drop down. And often, when their manned bombers were trying to escape the "ack-ack" (anti-aircraft) guns, they would just drop their load on their return trip. If they were hit with the bombs on board they might explode, so they didn't care where they dropped the bombs. The ack-ack guns were set up all over, in parks and streets, and were manned twenty-four hours a day to defend us against the Germans.

To keep the enemy from knowing where we were, we had blackouts. There were no signs or lights on the roads; we had heavy curtains on all our windows; and you had to turn off all your lights before you opened your door. The Air Raid Wardens, women and men, went around giving warnings and fines for showing light. (There weren't many cars, so they used bicycles for transportation – though bike lights weren't allowed either.)

People did many different jobs. Because the bombs often started fires, the Fire Watchers would be on the roofs to alert the fire crews to where the fires were. Then the Fire Fighters would go out to keep the fires from spreading. There were also volunteer ladies who would drive the canteens out and serve the Fire Fighters. Many of them lost their lives to bombs.

One night I woke up to sirens. Ambulances were coming, and kept coming all night long. I found out afterwards that that was the Dieppe raid. They had been bringing the wounded men and the bodies in to the hospital.

The skies of London and Liverpool were often filled with barrage balloons, large air balloons that formed a cover of protection for us against the bombers. The Germans were forced to fly over them. I felt that they wanted to wipe us out. But the people of England never gave up hope. When the glass of a storefront was shot out, the store was still open the next day!

The Battle of Britain was a pivotal point in the war. Many of the people who fought it were so young: Naval College Cadets of sixteen and seventeen years old, twenty-year-old wing commanders – men and boys were all sent to war, and many died like flies.

We often listened to the radio, though we weren't told very much. The news did not give many details about the war. Security was tight, and there were posters everywhere reminding us that "Loose lips sink ships." The first time I remember any news being released was when the papers announced that the German battleship *Scharnhorst* had been sunk. My brother's George's cruiser, HMS *Belfast*, was also mentioned as being in the battle.

We were cut off from our family during the war, since we were living in the south of England and our relatives were in Liverpool, up in the north. My grandmother, who was in her eighties, lived with my two maiden aunts – and a dog, a cat, a parrot and a canary. They would all go down into their bomb shelter at the end of the garden. We didn't have a phone, and we didn't visit – it was difficult for civilians to get onto a train. And if you did get on, you could have to wait forever for the troops to pass.

There was no entertainment then of the kind we have today. Before the war it was mostly bridge, singing and piano playing. We did keep that up during the war, but not as much. Vera Lynn was a popular singer then. Some of my favourite songs were *A Nightingale Sang in Barclay Square, The White Cliffs of Dover and We'll Meet Again.* There were also several dances outside of London.

On the 7th and 8th of May, we were not quite sure if the war was over – there were a lot of rumours. When it was finally announced that the war had ended, there was non-stop partying for two or three days, with a lot of bonfires. (But when George's ship heard the news, they turned the HMS *Belfast* right around and headed directly to the pacific conflict. He later received an award for his duty on the Murmansk Run.)

Thankfully, the only casualty my family had during the war was a cousin who lost his life while serving in the desert. Although my father was torpedoed three times, he and my brother made it through. My aunts and grandmother survived the war too.

My aunt chose to stay with the bakery after the war – a good many women chose to keep working. They liked the independence it gave them. That seemed to be the start of the women's movement. Of course women worked during the First World War too; but I think the difference was that the first war was only four years long, and this one was over six.

After the war, we moved to Vancouver. Although the men (my father, brother and later my husband) would never talk about what had happened to them during the war, the women in Canada talked to me about the war they knew. They talked about the hardships of rationing. Well, there were so many clothes in the shop windows, and their rations were huge compared to ours. So much food! Their stores were always open. They couldn't understand what the bombing was like, and never knew the feelings that come with the loss of safety. You had to be there to really understand that.

Beatrice 'Trix' Geary –
née Schreiber

At the beginning of the war, I worked as a secretary in a Toronto office. I was bored with office work, as was one of the other girls; so we decided to visit the recruiting office and sign up. On the way, we agreed not to tell anyone that we could type – we both wanted to work outside, at something more interesting and stimulating.

I had a brother who was in the army, a cousin who was a wren, and some friends who had joined the navy. Because of these friends, I too wanted to join the navy – besides, I thought the uniform was very smart!

Three months later, in the summer of 1944, I was on holiday on an island in cottage country when my orders to report for duty arrived, via Special Delivery, by boat. I had no regrets at cutting short my holiday: joining the navy was an exciting opportunity to be part of the war effort.

I did my basic training at HMCS Conestoga in Galt, Ontario. We were given our uniforms, taught how to march, salute and obey orders, and learned about navy rules and regulations. (At first we would salute everyone in uniform, including each other, just for practice!) We were also given TABT shots, which made some of the girls quite sick – but we had to carry on.

Everything seemed exciting in basic training – even the many chores we had to do, such as scrubbing floors and gardening. We were always kept busy. But there was much anticipation, not knowing what you were getting yourself into. I loved the outdoors and was a bit of a tomboy, having grown up with brothers. I didn't find it difficult working or living with other people. I know that some wrens became homesick, but I never was – mostly because I made such good friends. It was at Conestoga that our "Gang of Six" first met. The women who shared my cabin became (and remained) very close.

After three months of basic training, the six of us were drafted to HMCS St-Hyacinthe in Quebec, a large communications base and signal school. We were to be trained as Visual Signallers, to replace the male sailors who were going to sea to fight for our country. There were between 300 and 400 wrens at St-Hy, and some 2,000 male sailors. They respected us and treated us well; they knew that we took our training seriously, worked hard and wanted to do well. In the end, I think they even admitted that the wrens were better at signalling than the men!

The signals course was fantastic, I loved it. We were issued bell-bottom trousers because we would be climbing ladders to the rooftops to hoist up signal flags, and climbing the big masts in the Parade Square. (We were proud of our uniforms, and very proud of being in the navy.)

I found reading the flashing Morse code very difficult at first, but we practiced it enough that it eventually came quite easily. We spent hours every day sending and receiving Morse messages on the hand signal lamps (called Aldis lamps). Sometimes we would have to stand on the parade square in pairs and decode from a light flashing on the Drill Hall – one reading out the dots and dashes, the other recording them. Semaphore was taught to musical rhythm, often on the parade square with the St-Hy band. After a while I could only think in semaphore or Morse. We would sit in the mess sometimes and send semaphore messages back and forth with our fingers.

We also learned the meaning of different flags and pennants, and practiced signalling with them from the flag decks on rooftops around the parade square. We would have competitions hoisting messages and answering them.

Our signal training also included a simulator, which was meant to give you the experience of being on a tossing ship. It was quite realistic, so you had to have steady legs to stand on it and send messages via semaphore and Aldis lamp.

We had our meals in the mess and slept in barracks blocks. Every day we were wakened by an early morning call – usually a loud "Wakey, wakey, show a leg, especially you gals from Winnipeg" over the PA system. We found this so irritating that we eventually stuffed the speaker with sanitary pads to muffle the sound!

St.Hy also had one of the best military bands. At inspection it was often difficult to stand at attention when the band was playing a favourite tune. And dances in the Drill Hall were always fun – especially since the sailors outnumbered the wrens four to one! Each dance involved several different partners – great for a girl's morale.

The Gang of Six all passed our signal training at St-Hy and became full-fledged Visual Signallers (VSs) – or Bunting Tossers, as we were sometimes called. We could now proudly wear crossed flags on our sleeves. VS Wrens replaced VS sailors at signal stations from Prince Rupert to St. John's Newfoundland, releasing the sailors for sea duty.

We wren VSs started duty watches in the Halifax signal towers: on top of the post office, and at Jetty Three in the dockyard. Now we could really test our ability to send and receive messages by semaphore or by Morse code. Most of the messages were coded and top secret. Communication between ships, and from ship to shore, had to be visual: Halifax maintained strict radio silence to prevent any German submarines lurking in our waters from picking up secret information – such as convoy movements.

(During the day, we could see the convoys of ships at anchor in the harbour. At night, with only one small light blinking from each ship, the view from our lofty signal tower was like a sea of fireflies reflecting in the water. In the morning, the harbour was empty. The ships had slipped silently out in the darkness of night. We often wondered whether they crossed the Atlantic safely, and how many escaped the German torpedoes. When navy or merchant ships were sunk, survivors were often taken to the hospital in Halifax. Some wrens worked there as attendants, and we heard that many of the men were burned and injured badly. Some of them didn't make it.)

We felt very important, and the sailors treated us as friends – they often looked after us. We occasionally used our communications skills to further our friendships: it was against regulations to signal personal messages, but when the hours were long and there was no activity, we sometimes did "talk on the light." If you knew a sailor on a certain ship, you might get a message such as, "Meet you in the Green Lantern for tea." At least one wren met her future husband that way!

One day, I had just come off duty when suddenly there was a terrible explosion that shook the base. A group of us rushed to the roof of our wren block and looked across the harbour. There was a huge mushroom-shaped cloud over at the Armament Depot. Our officers, worried that the whole ammunition depot was going to explode, ordered us to muster on the parade square at the double. We were issued blankets and driven out to Point Pleasant Park. On the way, we passed civilians sitting on chairs and mattresses on their lawns and on the streets – they too had been told to get out of their houses in case the whole depot blew up. That evening, I'm sure many Haligonians were remembering the terrible explosion of 1917, when two ships – one of them an ammunition ship – collided in the harbour and flattened Halifax.

We spent a sleepless night in the park, but the next day everything was under control and we returned to our barracks.

Shortly afterwards came V-E Day, and anyone in Halifax then will remember the riots. When we finished our shifts that day, the Shore Patrol escorted us back to the wren block, where we were confined to barracks. What was going on? We soon learned that downtown

Halifax was in chaos; civilians and sailors were breaking into shops and liquor stores. Due to the short-sightedness of both civilian and naval authorities, no plans had been made to celebrate the end of the war.

But while we were confined to barracks, sitting on the top bunks and looking out at the north gate of Stad, we had front row seats to watch the Shore Patrol relieving sailors of bottles of liquor and pouring the contents at their feet! At one point, someone hoisted women's underwear on one of the rooftop flagpoles; and a sailor tried to ride a horse in at the front door of our wren block. (We never did hear what happened to the rider, or the horse.)

By V-J Day the authorities had learned a lesson, and every effort was made to celebrate. At Stadacona we had a great party: a long conga line snaked its way through the base, and toilet paper streamed from the barracks windows. We celebrated into the wee hours.

After the war was over, I had to put aside any thoughts of continuing with the navy. I had been in Signals for two years by then, and would have stayed longer if I could have. But many positions were created just for wartime and they didn't need us wrens any more, because the men had come back home to their old jobs.

I used my DVA war grants money to take a college course, then worked at a summer camp in Algonquin Park. In the fall of 1946 I went back to the boring office work, feeling very unsettled. I didn't know what I wanted to do: I was thinking of taking a university course or travelling around the world. But then I met Nevill Geary, my future husband, who had just returned from the Pacific. He had joined the Fleet Air Arm of the British Royal Navy, and after the war he transferred to the Canadian Naval Air Service. So when we married in May 1947, you could say I was back in the navy.

Being a wren was one of the best experiences of my life. It gave me confidence in myself, and a sense of purpose. In fact, most women I knew really enjoyed their work – they were proud to be doing something positive to help the war. We were treated well, housed and dressed and fed – although of course we weren't paid very much! But we were doing jobs that women didn't traditionally do, and I think that this opened the door for civilian women to do non-traditional jobs as well.

Even today, I believe it would be wonderful training for both men and women to join the armed forces if they don't know what they want to do in life. The Forces teach discipline, and that's useful for any job you might get when you leave.

Jeanne Walters –
née Melymick

Before the war, I lived in a small town named Wakaw. It had an interesting history: back in 1911, the whole site had been bodily moved from its original location on a lakeshore to be adjacent to the newly constructed railroad. The town showed so much promise that in 1919 it attracted a young lawyer named John Diefenbaker, and was his springboard to becoming prime minister.

During the Depression, we made our own fun. There was a girl's hockey team, baseball teams, tennis, sleighing parties, chess, poker in the local hotel, concerts and dances. The United Church Choir (in which I sang) produced drama on the town hall stage; and there were fundraising events such as a Fireman's Masquerade, a Wheat Pool, badminton dances and often the Hard Times dances in halls and barns. The biggest change in entertainment was when the first talking pictures came to the village in the 1930s: *The Terror, The Hometowners* and *Rin Tin Tin.* (The talkies were more expensive than the silent movies: 75 cents instead of 50 cents. But by 1935, when *King Kong* appeared, the price had dropped to 35 cents.)

When Britain and France went to war with Germany in early September 1939, I was seventeen and had just finished a three-year commercial course at the new technical college in Saskatoon. On September 4, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain addressed the nation in a broadcast from his home at No. 10 Downing St., telling the world of Germany's refusal to withdraw troops from Poland. France followed Great Britain, and Canada then also declared war.

For the second time, the Saskatoon area mobilized for war. Men and women flocked to join the army, air force, navy, merchant marine and auxiliary services. (In Wakaw, I remember that the first boy to enlist was Charlie McDougall.) The Armoury wasn't big enough to accommodate all those who wanted to enlist, so our Exhibition grounds were used as well. The Saskatoon Light Infantry left for Britain in the Canadian 1st Division. The navy trained in downtown quarters until the new HMCS Unicorn building was built around 1944. (It's still in use today.) The Royal Canadian Air Force used our airport as a flight training school; it later became the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan.

All told, there were more than five thousand stationed here during the war. We had airmen from New Zealand, Australia and other British Empire countries; and also a squadron of the RCAF Women's Division (WD). All the local service clubs arranged events for the men and women, and many citizens would invite service people to their homes on Sunday evenings. There were several dance halls besides the Legion, where all the uniformed men came looking for a good time. I spent many a weekend dancing the "Lambeth Walk" and the "Beer Barrel Polka." My feet got tired of being stepped on by military boots!

At that time, I was already going steady with Les, my husband-to-be, who had been training with a peacetime army unit. I wanted to enlist, but Les didn't want me to. He did, however, and was sent first to Debert, Nova Scotia, and then overseas. The war seemed real then. I wrote him two or three times a week. We both numbered our letters, so we could read them in order. The last ones were somewhere in the 200s.

Although I think patriotism was the reason most young Canadians joined up, many enlisted because of the Depression. In the Forces, one could eat three good meals a day, wear clean clothes and possibly get overseas. Who knew that six years of war would go by, thousands would die, and many would come home sick in body and soul?

Despite Les's objections, I decided to enlist after all – I just felt I should. The war seemed to be in our favour in early 1944. There was a army enlistment office here and all one had to do was walk in. I was sent to Regina, on a CNR train jammed with troops and civilians. There weren't enough seats, so people stood in the aisles of the swaying train. After a week of interviews and tests, we new recruits were sent to Kitchener, Ontario, for basic training.

At the camp, we were confined to barracks for the first week. I believe we had four vaccination shots on our second day. When we received our uniforms, I found that the skirts came down to my ankles, since I was less than five feet tall. (Eventually, they were shortened for me.) Our room had double-decker bunks, and my three roommates were from Kakabeka Falls, Montreal and Regina. The mess hall was a lively place; and although I was naturally a slow eater, I found myself gulping my food down – otherwise I would have starved in a week! There was cantaloupe and ice cream for dessert every day. I eventually quite liked it.

Our days started with a 6 a.m. wake-up, and then we did parade-square drills. All our time was spent on these, on learning how to salute, how to pack a haversack – and how to be neat in our walking-out dress. One hot afternoon, a few of the women fainted. When we joined up, we were all totally uncoordinated; but with training we turned into a disciplined marching Canadian Women's Army Corps unit.

When we graduated, we were all posted to different depots or sent overseas. I found myself back in Regina, at Manning Depot No. 12. Because I was an only child, and my mother had been widowed when I was very young, I had been told I'd probably be stationed in Canada rather than sent overseas. I was assigned to clerical duties. All the censored confidential files for MD No. 12 were kept there, and

I came to know a lot of interesting facts about people and places. I lived close to home, so I would often bring CWACs back with me on weekend leaves.

As the war got underway, our city strongly supported government fund-raising efforts. The "Back the Attack" and "Buy Victory Bonds" campaigns often exceeded their objectives. A streetcar provided by the city carried an official money thermometer. It was known as "Saskatoon's Victory Loan Special," and it was a familiar site on its trips around town, often carrying military bands in the evenings.

In April 1943, I remember a unique ceremony being arranged in conjunction with the Fourth Victory Loan Drive. There was a pageant depicting the four freedoms for which the United Nations was fighting: Freedom from Fear, Freedom of Speech, Freedom from Want and Freedom to Worship. A thousand airmen from No. 4 Service Flying Training School and No. 7 Initial Training School took part in the Wings parade. Brigadier G.A.H. Trudeau, Commanding Officer of MD No. 12, took the salute from the various units.

During the war years, a major attraction was to drive out to the airport to watch the student pilots learning to fly. Every weekend, cars would be parallel-parked along the shoulder of the gravelled highway. The SFTS featured twin-engine Avro Ansons, the flying classroom for training bomber pilots. Fighter pilots were taught in single-engined Harvard trainers. Many students had obvious problems with depth perception: some tried to land their planes fifteen feet above the runway, others three feet under it. Unfortunately, there were times when the plane's landing gear would collapse, injuring or even killing the pilot.

Early in the war, Prime Minister Mackenzie King announced that the government did not believe that conscription was necessary in Canada. The military headquarters in Regina did a survey of available manpower that showed there were more than three thousand men in Saskatoon, between the ages of eighteen and forty-five, who weren't in uniform. Of course, there were thousands of veterans from the First World War, but they were too old for combat. So they were assigned to looking after prisoner of war camps, guarding the coasts, and manning guns and radar stations. It was certain that Canada was quite safe from any enemy attack.

Eventually, thousands of men were in fact conscripted for home defence. Some later went on active duty and some were sent overseas. Many of these "zombies," as they were called, were from French Canada. I recall a mutiny of sorts on the West Coast about them being sent overseas.

But most Canadians, including those in Saskatoon, adapted to the war measures and carried on as normal a life as possible. The people still had their pioneering spirit and good-neighbour attitude that showed their strength and courage. For instance, one year the government wanted us to grow our own vegetables. The challenge caught on; and soon all the vacant lots became Victory Gardens, which were tended to in the summer heat. And despite so many items being rationed, many of us still sent food parcels and cigarettes overseas.

However, there were many scarcities. Meat, butter and sugar were rationed; gasoline and car tires were hard to get; and because metal and rubber were scarce too, items such as bicycles were not a top priority. Liquor was also rationed; so that even though jobs became plentiful, and many men could make big money (60 dollars or more a week) working in the shipyards, their wages still couldn't buy what some of them wanted.

We scanned the newspapers and listened to radio reports eagerly every day for news from overseas. One day, the *Star Phoenix* ran a photograph from England of Princess Elizabeth (as she was then) presenting the Regimental Colours to the officers of the 1st Battalion Saskatoon Light Infantry.

But as the years went on, the growing list of casualties caused many heartaches. Everyone became anxious when they saw a telegraph boy on a bicycle, because it usually meant that a terrible message was being delivered of the death of a loved one.

So it was wonderful to hear of Germany's surrender on May 7, 1945. (The Japanese were not conquered until August 15, 1945.) All across Canada, veterans were welcomed home; and in Saskatoon, some came back from prison camps in Germany and Japan. One of these was our good friend George Porteous, who was captured by the Japanese, used as slave labour, treated badly and weakened by lack of food. He would later become Lieutenant Governor of Saskatchewan.

Saskatoon, with the help of government at all levels, tried to help its former servicemen and women adjust back to civilian life. Hangars and H-huts were used for lodging and for classrooms, and new houses were built on lots donated by the city. Many veterans were able to resume their former jobs, which had been kept for them. Others took advantage of the government-sponsored university courses that were made available.

After the war, more than 40,000 war brides arrived in Canada. There is still a War Brides Association here, and they have even published a book about their life in Canada.

The war did wonders for women's liberation. Before, one could say that women fought their battles just being housewives! But the war changed all that, and women began holding men's jobs. In the Ashdown hardware store where I worked then, all the staff (except for a few department managers) were women. And when war production began, thousands of women went to work in shipyards, textile plants, lumber mills – even ferried air force bombers to Britain. Instead of it being ladylike not to work, women were able to handle men's jobs and do them as well as the men.

But what I remember most about my time in the army is the camaraderie, even with all of us from different backgrounds. I still hear from two of them today.

Phoebe Magee –
née Freeman

I graduated from boarding school near Montreal in 1937, and really wanted to get on with my education – I took private lessons in French, German and art. But my mother was keen on me making my debut, or "coming out." I felt it was a waste. I suppose in some ways it wasn't; but the whole tradition of coming out goes back to when young women were put on the "marriage market." The debut was a way of introducing girls to society when they were of marriageable age. (Being a debutante has become much less popular now, though it still happens in some places.)

During that year, there was a lot of entertaining – my family hosted some of the balls and tea parties. One had to have a wardrobe suited for the social whirl. Coming out wasn't something that really appealed to me, though in some ways it was a good idea because it enlarged your acquaintance. But a lot of the young men who went to these balls generally weren't doing anything interesting with their careers – they just made a practice of appearing at all the big parties. They were known (rather slightingly) as "debs' delights," and filled a role as dinner and dance partners.

Around the same time as my debut, I became a member of the Junior League – a North American volunteer organization for young women. It isn't mentioned much these days, because it's sometimes considered rather elitist and snobbish. It was very good experience, though, and set me on course as a volunteer for the next sixty years.

After my debut I decided I wanted to go to art school, and started studying Commercial Art at what is now Concordia University. My family had a summer house up in the Laurentians, and we were up there when we heard the announcement on the radio that the war had started.

I think ours was a patriotic family, and we knew that we would do something for the war. But at that time, there weren't yet any Services for women. It wasn't until they were well established that I started to think about joining up. My stepfather had been in the army during the First World War, so I knew something about the military. I also read a great deal, mainly history and biographies – I went to a private school where many of my teachers were British.

I wound up enlisting because of friends. I went to Toronto to see some friends from school who had joined the RCAF Women's Division. I visited some of them at the training depot in Toronto, and found them very enthusiastic. I spent some nights thinking if this was what I wanted to do, then made up my mind and applied. I chose the Air Force partly because I knew some people in it; partly because it was the first service that opened up to women; and partly because my stepfather was in the army, and I didn't want anyone to think I was pulling strings. I felt that I ought to be in another branch of the service.

At that time one had to be twenty-one to get in, and I was under age – most of my contemporaries were a year older than me. But after I had passed my twenty-first birthday, I was called up. That was in January 1943.

I did my basic training in Toronto, at the old Havergal School on Jarvis Street – it had been converted into the first training depot for airwomen. I didn't know exactly what to expect from service life, but basic training was an easy adjustment for me – I had been to boarding school, and was used to living with other people. The only really unpleasant part of basic training was the many shots we had to have. They made you feel sick, but you had to keep going unless you were really desperately ill. That certainly toughened us up!

The recruiting centre had told me there were three trades I could join: General Duties, Cook or Telephone Operator. The first two didn't sound very interesting, so I took a quick course on how to operate the Private Branch Exchange (PBX) telephone board that was used on the air stations, and joined up as a telephone operator. I worked at a Service Training School in Hagersville, Ontario, for a few weeks. But I wasn't a very good telephone operator! So they quickly switched me to Administration, which is what I wanted to do anyway. I went back to Jarvis Street to take the three-week administrative course; then I was posted to the Manning Depot at Rockcliffe, in Ottawa.

At No. 7 Manning Depot, which was part of the larger air force station at Rockcliffe, the Officer Commanding was my future sister-in-law, Willa Walker – a commissioned officer by that time. (The OC was someone in charge of a smaller unit, under the Commanding Officer.)

I was a corporal when I arrived at Rockcliffe, one of a number of NCOs training the incoming drafts of airwomen from all over the country. Then I was promoted to sergeant, with a little more freedom and authority. It was interesting work and good experience – I felt I was doing something useful, albeit not terribly exciting.

We had the new recruits for a month, to train them in all sorts of subjects. Every draft that came in was formed into a squadron, each with an officer in charge. She would have a couple of officers under her, then the sergeant and a couple of corporals. There were four units like that, constantly rotating. One week a draft of airwomen would arrive, and they would be No. 1 Squadron. The next week, another would come in and form No. 2 Squadron. There was a constant flow of new recruits coming in and airwomen graduating. We made sure that these women had their uniforms and equipment, and we trained them, drilled them and taught them air force discipline and regulations.

(While I was on staff at Rockcliffe, one of the new recruits to arrive for training was my mother – she had joined the RCAF too! Since I was an officer, she had to address me as Ma'am. That seemed pretty ridiculous.)

The authorities assessed your abilities; and if they thought you were capable of handling more responsibility, you could be promoted. I was commissioned as an officer from the rank of sergeant, and found that being an officer was much more comfortable than being a NCO: living quarters and dining facilities were much better.

I was sent to the recruiting office in Montréal, and did recruiting for a while. Then I went back to Rockcliffe as a junior officer; and eventually I was put in command of a squadron of my own. After a few months of this, I was one of nine women who were posted over to England to be trained as photographic interpretation officers. At that time, we were the first Canadian women to be offered the opportunity.

I found life overseas the most challenging experience I had in the air force. When I arrived in the U.K., I was sent up to Yorkshire to a station called Skipton-on-Swale that was just getting established. The station was in the Vale of York, about two miles from a town called Thirsk. It was quite a lively market town before the war, though it wasn't very big: just one small hotel and a couple of pubs. That part of Yorkshire was on the ancient Roman road from England to Scotland: to the west were the Pennines, the mountain chain that runs up the west side of England, and behind the town were the Hambleton Hills. James Herriot wrote about that area in his books about veterinary life; and it was also where the airfields of No. 6 Bomber Group were.

The accommodations at Skipton were grim: we shared a very small Nissen hut that was terribly cold and uncomfortable. (Actually, I was pretty cold and uncomfortable the whole time I was in Yorkshire.) Just trying to keep oneself tidy with very few facilities was difficult. We weren't allowed to take much overseas with us, so my personal items were few. I had brought pictures of my family and my fiancé with me; other than that, my uniform took up most of what I could carry. (I had brought a few civilian clothes, but most were stolen from a train later on when I was on leave in London. I didn't replace them because I didn't have time for shopping – and not much chance to wear civilian clothes either.)

At first, Skipton ground personnel were all RAF. There were two squadrons, and I guess some 500-600 service personnel and civilian workers. Bomber Group HQ would send us information by scrambler telephone, so the message was kept secure – we had to write down those messages very quickly. If there was going to be a bombing raid, the message would tell us the target for that night.

Initially, the station was just for training pilots who had converted to heavy bombers. Practice bombing raids were carried out all across the U.K. Of course they never dropped real bombs; but there was an imaginary bomb load, a target and a route. All those things had to be recorded on a plotting map so that these training operations were carried out properly.

My work there was challenging and very interesting. When I arrived, a WAAF officer interviewed me and gave me a choice of Photographic Interpretation or Intelligence. I thought intelligence sounded much more interesting, so I opted for that. In the long run, though, I wound up doing photographic interpretation as well. My skills were mostly self-taught, but I had a natural aptitude for it and became proficient. My work involved recording information about targets, routes and bomb loads via the scrambler, and preparing maps for the air crews.

When the station eventually became operational, the intelligence section was enlarged and Canadian personnel took over. Squadron

Leader George Munro and a couple of others came in as Intelligence Officers, and my job changed. I now handled the maps and ran an intelligence library – even though it was just a small station, a lot of information came in that had to be made easily available for pilots and crews to read. I helped prepare for the briefings, and occasionally went to them; but never to the debriefings after the operation had been carried out. I suppose it was considered inappropriate for a woman to be present: the pilots were tired when they came back, and probably swore a lot. But as time went on, I did increasingly more photo interpretation of where the bombs had dropped – plotting their grouping in order to assess the pilots' bomb-aiming accuracy.

During my time in the U.K., I was sent twice to the RCAF Intelligence School on the edge of London. There were people there from all the Allied Forces, and it was very interesting. We learned about maps and various topics, such as military and political conditions in Europe, information about the enemy, vital target areas, security matters, escape devices for air crews, and so on. They gave us tests, one of which was for mechanical ability – for some reason I scored very highly on that. And air force officers gave us lectures on various subjects. (One of them was the son of Ernest Shackleton, the famous Arctic explorer.)

Although I was in London during some bombing raids, the only time I was actually under fire was very late in the war, at Skipton-on-Swale. It was bedtime when I heard a "rat-tat-tat" outside. "What on earth is that?" I thought. The windows in our Nissen hut were very high up; but my bed was under a window, so I hopped up on the bed, pushed out the window and saw what looked like fireworks across the sky. Then I suddenly realized they were tracer bullets – a German plane was shooting up the airfield! I dived under the bed, but the attack didn't last long. I suppose it was a "last gasp" effort, an attempt at intimidation. They just swooped in and shot things up; nobody was injured. (But on another station, when a German pilot shot up a Nissen hut, a young airwoman was killed when the bullets penetrated the roof.)

On the whole, though, life there wasn't really stressful until we began to lose a lot of crews in the bombing raids over Germany. You would get to know some of the men – then next thing, they were gone. It wasn't like being in a war situation where you actually see people die, but you were still very aware of death. It was quite depressing at times, but you had to put it behind you.

My senior officer was George Munro, from Stratford, Ontario. He was a very nice man. I was a great deal younger than he, the only woman in an all-male section – in fact, there was only one other woman, a British WAAF officer, on the whole station. But George had a sensitivity that was uncommon in male officers, and took a protective, fatherly attitude toward me.

In our time off, someone would usually play the piano in the mess, or we would play cards. I made some good friends among the men, though I obviously wasn't up for grabs since I was engaged. But the Canadian men were still pleased to have a Canadian woman on the station – for them it was like having a sister, someone to link them with home. At first, though, I had some trouble with the lady WAAF officer: she was having a good time dating all the Canadians, and wasn't too pleased to see me! I told her I wasn't trying to cut in on her, so she should just relax. I said, "Look, I'm here and you're here, so we might as well get along." We finally became good friends. She was later posted to Egypt, I think.

Eventually, an RCAF Nursing Sister arrived at the station, and then a Dietician – so there were two other Canadian women. I spent some time off with them. If we had a day off, we would take our bikes and try to buy some eggs from a local farmer. (It was rare for us to have the opportunity to meet the local civilians.) There wasn't really much to do, not in Yorkshire in wartime. A picnic was a treat for us.

We didn't get a great deal of leave time, and sometimes it was only long enough to go somewhere not too far away, such as York, Leeds or Harrowgate. I sometimes went to London on leave; and my fiancé and I spent whatever leaves we could together – one of them with my sister-in-law's family in Scotland. He was posted away to Italy to serve, went back to staff college in Canada, and then had some leave in England; so we decided to get married then. There was a small church in the village that had become the unofficial RCAF station church, and we were married there in August 1944. We had our reception on the station afterwards.

I continued my intelligence work in Yorkshire until almost the end of the war, finishing as a Flight Officer – the RCAF equivalent of Captain. I was posted to the Repatriation Depot in Warrington, and spent a couple of weeks waiting to get on the draft to go home. Married women had priority for repatriation, and my circumstances gave me extra priority: my husband was now a major, had volunteered for the Far East (where the war still continued), and was to be posted home for a leave. I made it back to Canada in the spring of 1945.

When I returned to Montréal, I was very aware that the civilian population hadn't suffered much compared with people in Europe. That was certainly noticeable. I remember once in Leeds, during the war, watching the civilians walking by and thinking how tired and grey they looked, as if they were absolutely drained. If the war had lasted much longer I imagine there might have been widespread health problems. But even after the war, it took quite a while for things to recover in Britain. Rationing continued for a couple of years, and people in Canada were still sending food parcels overseas.

One day shortly before V-E Day, I looked over the shoulder of the man sitting next to me on the streetcar, and saw my husband's photograph on the front page of the newspaper he was reading. I was quite staggered. He and Major-General Chris Vokes had been negotiating a cease-fire with the Germans in Holland.

After the announcement, everybody was anxious to get back to normal life. Those of us who were married were ready to become housewives and mothers. My husband returned home in October

1945, and went to Bishop's University for a year and then to Queen's. We slipped back into civilian life and raised a family of three.

I would not have missed my wartime service for anything. I was much more able to understand what my husband (and other men) had endured on active service; it was an enduring bond between us. I met a number of fine and dedicated women from all across this country, many of whom I still count as friends and keep in contact with.

I feel the motive for women to join the armed forces today is entirely different than it was in our day. Enlisting now is a career choice – and what career-minded woman would sign up for the equivalent of 90 cents a day? But joining the service in wartime was a duty to which one committed indefinitely, with no release unless by misconduct, medical discharge or death. I consider that period of my life as volunteer work – something that I've continued throughout my life in various useful ways, for the good of the community.

12. Dorothy Lutz (2nd from left) and co-workers learn the art of clamping.

13. Barbara Power's place of employment after the bombing. (See story)

14. Rockcliffe Base, Circa 1945.

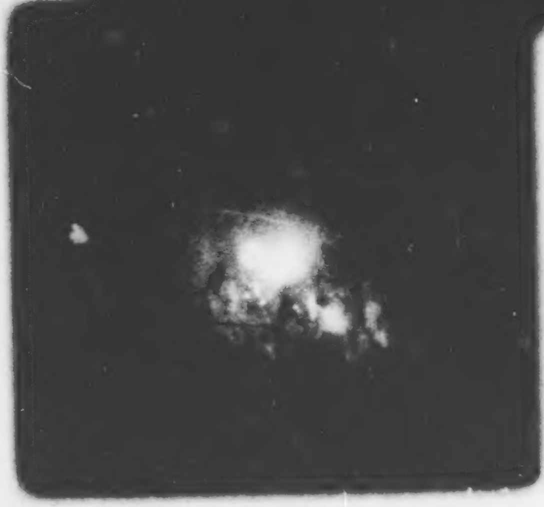
15. Phoebe Magee (on right) and her mother, at her mother's enlistment.

16. Mabel Patterson extends a hand to greet Sir Winston Churchill (British Prime Minister), and his daughter, Mary.

17. Queen inspecting troops.

18. Lou Marr (on left) in front of the photography school on the Rockcliffe base.

19. The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.



20. Nell Ross in the driver's seat.

21. The attack by Bomber Command, made in the early hours of July 18th, 1944, on the west bank of the river Orne.

Irene Pidgeon –
née Armstrong

When I was eighteen in early 1944, I was working for the Department of the Navy in Ottawa. I decided to join the RCAF Women's Division, so I went to the recruiting office on Queen Street. After the forms and the physical, I was sworn in and told to report to Rockcliffe for training the following Friday.

But when I tried to tender my resignation at work, my director, who had served in the navy during the First World War, said "Oh no, you can't leave us for a junior service, you're a traitor."

I went back to the recruiting office with my tale of woe. The officer in charge was outraged and promptly took me to Parliament Hill to see his Member of Parliament. (He had to make sure I had a hat first, as women weren't allowed into the Parliament Buildings without hats at that time.)

He told him my story, and the MP asked me, "Did the director really call you a traitor for joining up?"

"Yes," I replied.

"We'll see about that," was his answer. "You go home, give me your phone number and I will call you later." True to his word, he called that afternoon to tell me: "Take the afternoon off and submit your resignation seven days hence – no discussion. Any problems, call me." He did wonder, though, if I would be better off joining up. At my government job, my take-home pay was 56 dollars a month. In the Air Force, I would get my clothes, room and board – and 90 cents a day!

I reported to Rockcliffe in June 1944. (My bunkmate there was Ethel Coombs, another recruit from Ottawa; and we remain friends to this day.) After basic training, I chose the trade of Hospital Assistant, a forerunner to the present-day Nursing Assistant position. I was posted to the Technical Training School in St. Thomas, Ontario. This establishment was originally a mental hospital; but it was unoccupied when the Second World War broke out, so the government took it over to be used as a trade school. When I went there, it was a 250-bed hospital with 17 miles of corridors, bars on all the windows, and everything built to suit the needs of mental patients.

Shortly after my arrival at the hospital, while I was still doing "on-the-job training," a patient was brought in who had been pulled from a burning aircraft that had crashed in England. This was my introduction to the war wounded. He had arrived in St. Thomas from Ottawa on a stretcher in the baggage car of a train, and his journey had taken 23 hours. I was asked to give him a bath and to make him lunch. His head was bound in a bandage and under it I could see a small red mark on his forehead. One leg and one arm were in casts; I couldn't see his other arm. Was it there? I wondered. It was: it was attached to his abdomen, so that new skin could grow on his fingers from his abdomen. I bathed him where I could, tried to make him feel comfortable and made him some soup.

He was very quiet and we did not talk; but he must have read my name tag. I was transferred from the burn unit shortly afterwards and didn't see my patient again. A few weeks later, though, I was at a movie when this fine-looking fellow said, "Hello, Armstrong!" I didn't recognize him until I saw the small red mark on his forehead. He teased me and said, "Didn't recognize me with my clothes on, eh?!" The doctors had done a wonderful job of reconstruction for my first patient.

We had an Ear, Nose and Throat ward at St. Thomas, and a lot of young people came who needed tonsillectomies. They had to stay for ten days, with no going home for TLC from mum and they often got restless and mischievous. One of their favourite tricks was to monkey with the thermometers. We always took the patients' temperatures at 1900 hours. When we did the rounds, we usually dropped off the thermometers with the patients, then went back to check them. We learned to beware of an unusually high fever for no good reason! It was not uncommon for some of them to wait until our backs were turned, then hold a lighted cigarette to the thermometer until it got to 103 degrees. It was just enough for us do to a double-take and recheck it without leaving their bedside. Devilish, weren't they?

After D-Day we received a lot more wounded patients. They were unhappy young men: their fighting days were over now, and they had to gather strength to fight their disabilities and get on with their lives.

When the war in Europe ended, the staff at St. Thomas dispersed and I was transferred to Lachine, Quebec. Once again I was welcoming back soldiers who needed hospital treatment before they could return to their homes. Some of these were walking patients and could get day passes to the bright lights of nearby Montréal. When they returned, I would ask them, "Did you have a good day?" "Oh yes," they would often say. "We went to the Gaiety."

Well, one weekend afternoon I was visiting my aunt in Montréal and we decided to go to a show. I remembered all the men talking about this place, and suggested: "Let's go to the Gaiety." My aunt was new to Montréal and knew no more about the place than I did; so off we went – she dressed in her fur coat, I in my RCAF uniform for the outing. It turned out that the Gaiety was a burlesque theatre, complete with a strip show! My aunt and I laughed about that mistake for years. I never asked those fellows again if they'd had a good day!

There were two shifts in Lachine: one from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., the other from 5 p.m. to 7 a.m. We generally split the night shift with the Duty Nursing Sister from midnight to 6 a.m. One of the essential tasks was to keep the cookstove going in the kitchen. We would make a big pot of coffee at midnight and then at 3 a.m. we put a pail of coal on the fire and hoped it burned well. It was essential to have a good hot fire when the cooks came in at 5:30 a.m. – you were bound to catch their wrath if the fire wasn't ready.

From Lachine I went to Trenton, Ontario, where I met my husband in June 1946. His name was T. John Pidgeon. The day I was discharged, in August 1946, he gave me a diamond ring. He was staying in the RCAF and we thought he'd remain in Trenton; but then he was transferred to Edmonton. We had a hastily arranged wedding at Chalmers United Church in Ottawa on October 18, 1946, and he went ahead to Edmonton until I could join him.

My service days as LAW Armstrong lasted for only twenty-six months; but as Irene Pidgeon, I spent eighteen years as a service wife. There were lots of good times – and although there were a few that were not as good, it's always the good times that make the best memories! We have a great extended family of friends from our service days, and my husband and I have been married for nearly fifty-four years now.

Alena Langlois –
née Hayes

I remember very well the night the war started: the announcement came over the radio while I was out for a car ride with my first boyfriend! Car rides were quite a sensation back then.

I lived with my parents in Millbank, New Brunswick, and had just matriculated after Grade Eleven. I was planning to become a registered nurse, and went to St. Mary's Hospital in Montreal to train.

I had thoughts about enlisting then, even though my parents were very concerned about it. My younger brother had already enlisted, and I knew how worried they were about him. So at first I allowed my family to influence me against it, and decided to abandon the idea and pursue a career in civilian nursing instead.

But the war was on everybody's minds, and most of the nurses in training were contemplating enlistment. So after graduating, I waited through the winter to consider my decision; and then my classmate Edie Roach and I went together to enlist at MD No. 4 in Montréal.

I was called up into service with my draft in 1944, very shortly after enlisting, and we were sent to St. Anne's Military Hospital, just outside Montréal, for a month. We were given our complete uniforms there, and awaited our transfer to a military camp for basic training. The hospital housed many veterans from the First World War, twenty years earlier; and several of the nursing sisters who had served during that war were still there as well. Being young and newly graduated, we were pretty rank-conscious at first. And as new recruits, we were in complete reverence of the First World War nursing sisters, whom we looked up to as superior beings. In fact, we were kind of scared of them: most were very senior, so they were Matrons and in charge of the rest.

From the hospital, we were sent to Petawawa for basic training. A Warrant Officer was in charge of our training, and I think we were quite a challenge for him – we weren't really that serious about marching! But when we finally wrote our exams, we had no problems getting our second pips – I was a First Lieutenant Nursing Sister, Lt. N/S. We stayed there waiting for our embarkation overseas.

By this time all the Canadian hospital units had gone over, taking with them everything they would need for looking after patients. They also had CCSs, Casualty Clearing Stations, which were forward units that went ahead to the front while the hospitals remained back away from the fighting. All the staff assigned to these hospitals had already gone, though, and the only way we were going to get overseas would be to replace nurses who were returning.

Nurses were taken in twos and threes; so when our chance finally arrived, it came down to several of us who had enlisted on the same day. Only two could go; so the Matron passed around four straws. I wasn't one of the lucky ones – two of the girls went off to Europe, and another one and I were left behind. We were invited to go on one of the hospital ships that were bringing back the wounded; but the matron thought we might lose our next opportunity to go to the front if we did. So many of us chose to stay in Petawawa and take our chances – which was a mistake, I realized later.

As a nursing sister I was regular army, part of the RCAMC, the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps. We had help on the wards: some volunteers, some Red Cross personnel (they wore blue with an apron) and the St. John Ambulance people (they wore light grey uniforms).

We had a number of social activities. I think most people in public entertainment were very much aware of their important role in keeping morale up. Everybody tried to contribute to the war effort. There were free concerts and films. Before a movie, there would be twenty minutes of huge newsreels. (They would show the same news for a week!) That was our way of visualizing the conflict.

We kept ourselves entertained as well, with pranks and practical jokes. My girlfriend Helen Fitzgerald was absolutely petrified of cats. One afternoon I was walking across the parade square and found a little kitten, and I immediately came up with a plan. When Helen went into the bathroom to brush her hair, I threw the kitten in with her and closed the door. Well, she started screaming; and the kitten was so frightened that it leaped and bounced around the room, squealing, and finally needed to be retrieved from the toilet! We all laughed and thought it was a good joke, but Helen was so angry with me. She knew that I was afraid of spiders, and threatened, "I'm going to get you!" She never did, though.

One might not expect there to be much to do in Petawawa, but we were kept busy all the time. There were German prisoners working in POW camps in the woods north of Petawawa, and we had several incidents of these men getting hurt. Once a prisoner was brought in after he had been crushed against a tree by a truck. Six Germans were brought in and lined up against the wall, to donate blood for transfusions to this man. While I was working with the transmission tube, one of the attachments became separated; and I got all smeared with blood trying to fix it. I looked up just in time to see one of the lads pass out – they were big, tall men, and looked so strong! Unfortunately, even with all our efforts, they lost the patient.

But I don't remember any personal contact with any of the POWs. My only experiences were if they were hurt and brought into our hospital. They were escorted in by Canadian troops, nursed briefly in the wards, and then taken straight back to the camps. Even when they were in the OR for surgery, Canadian soldiers would guard them. The Germans looked well-nourished and healthy; as far as I know, they were well looked after. Most nations – certainly, we liked to feel, the Allied nations – adhered to the Geneva Convention.

The scary thing was that even though Germany was only a small nation, the Nazis had taken over all of Europe and were forcing the countries they had conquered to fight for them. Poland, Italy, France – the only people who didn't fight for Germany were those in the underground or resistance movements. There was an awful fear hanging over us that Germany might win the war, and that people everywhere would lose all the rights that we took for granted – rights to worship, and to own property or businesses.

It was in the public consciousness that this could happen. We were extremely aware of that danger throughout the Battle of Britain, which lasted a year. If Britain had fallen, that would have meant disaster: at that time Canada was part of Britain, so if they fell, we fell. The German planes would quickly have arrived on our East Coast, and the Japanese planes on the West Coast. (Planes then weren't as powerful as they are now, but they were still quite capable of crossing the Atlantic.)

But while we waited hopefully in Petawawa, for a year and a half, to go overseas – V-E Day came, then Japan capitulated, and then the war was over. We were demobilized and had to make plans for the future. One benefit of being military was that we were given special train passes; so after we were discharged in Montreal, a friend and I travelled out west to Vancouver.

I worked there at the Shaughnessy Hospital, serving veterans who had been prisoners in Hong Kong and Japan. Seeing them as they came in was really sad. After five years of imprisonment they had various nutritional deficiencies, such as beri-beri, from eating only rice. Many men returned to us in braces, or as paraplegics. The injuries on the paraplegic ward and in orthopaedic surgery were mainly gunshot wounds, and amputations as a result of land mines – although there were more injuries from grenades than land mines. Many had other sorts of ailments. But they were all cheerful, no matter what they were suffering! In all the years I nursed the returning soldiers, I could never have asked for better patients.

After two years nursing at Shaughnessy, I moved back east again and spent seven more years with the Veteran's Queen Mary Hospital in Montréal. The care given there was excellent, with access to all kinds of specialists – such as Dr. Wilder Penfield, the famous neurosurgeon, who would come for a full consultation. In my view, the veterans were treated very well; they never lacked for attention, and if they needed something special, they got it. Some patients I worked with may still be living, but they probably never got out of the hospital. They didn't die, but they gave their entire lives to the war.

During my service years, I was rather insulated in the hospital. But afterwards, fully realizing what those boys went through was astounding. So many people tend to take Remembrance Day for granted, and whiz right by the Memorial on November 11 (even at eleven in the morning, when they're supposed to be observing a minute of silence) – never remembering not only the men who died overseas for our freedom, but the ones who came back crippled. Many of these boys who made it back faced a future worse than death: missing limbs, paralyzed from the neck down, head injuries and so on. And these were all young men, only in their twenties.

For me, though, the transition back to civilian life was fairly easy. Although the Maritimes were very poor before the war, I was brought up on a farm, so we were never cold or hungry. We were very fortunate compared to people in the cities, who were suffering. There was no money to spare for anything. But all that changed completely after the war. It was good times then, with lots of bands and dancing! There were the "Gibson Girls," and all the fashions changed – everybody became very conscious of fashions and style again.

I left my nursing career after I married and became pregnant. In those days, almost no wife and mother went to work – your husband would be shocked to death if you suggested it! So you stayed home and raised the children and looked after him. It was definitely not at all popular for women to work and you really had to explain yourself. And there was no such thing as day care either.

Another thing that finally came out after the war was the full story of what happened to the Jews. During the war, the facts would have been known only to the top officers – certainly not to the public, or even we lower ranks. I guess that was probably a good thing, but people were so naïve. Even without the full knowledge, though, there was no question of not going to war.

Two years ago, my daughter Lisa and I visited the camp in northern Austria, Mautheusen. It was a bitterly cold day when we went through all the corridors and saw the wooden boards on which prisoners slept. We saw the places where their teeth were extracted to collect the gold fillings, and the "showers" where gas came out of spigots in the ceiling.

We also watched a video, produced by the captain who led the American forces that eventually freed Mautheusen. He said that when they marched up to the gates – all the Nazi guards had fled by this time, leaving the gates open – the prisoners were just standing there like live skeletons, waiting. This big, strong, good-looking officer was crying as he recalled this, having to wipe the tears from his face. There were such atrocities, and every nation feared that if the Nazis had had their way, it could have happened here as well.

From my wartime experiences, I developed a pride in Canada as a nation – and a realization of how fortunate we are compared to some of the countries that were overrun. As a reader, I have the feeling that the military has not been getting enough positive media coverage lately; that not enough of us are aware of the sacrifices that were made so many years ago. The military is still trying to protect our freedom – and because we are free, we tend to take it for granted and assume that things could never change. But those of us who were afraid of what would happen if Nazi Germany won the war don't take these things for granted.

Marcella Menard –
née Graff

In September 1939, when the Second World War began, I was living on the family farm near Hesson, Ontario. Victory loans, Victory gardens and war work all began; and the local newspaper, the *Kitchener-Waterloo Record,* printed a notice that women were being hired for shift work in the war industries. I applied and was hired by the Sunshine Waterloo Company, making smoke bombs and land mines.

My first job was soldering land mines. Five or six of us girls sat on tall chairs at a long table, with a high frame in the centre for the rolls of solder and the acetylene torches. A round dish was fastened at each person' s place to hold the mine while it was soldered. It was tricky at first to get the solder running smoothly in a circle: you had to have the heat just right to seal the joint. We tested the mines for soldering leaks using a large tank of water. (When I started, the mines had to be turned by hand. But one day I arrived at my station for the early morning shift and found that the table had been automated – a new invention that would speed up production considerably.)

After the soldering section, I was moved into the smoke bomb department upstairs. My job there involved using a turret lathe to cut a fraction off the end of a stud, around the top stem, and cutting the same amount off the bottom end. After months of practice, when I had become efficient enough at this to meet the quota, I was moved to another capacity: working with the annular oven used to make the cases for the smoke bombs. The cases were round metal shells with a spot-welded base on a four-inch tube. They were lined up automatically, without touching, on a conveyer belt that rotated slowly through the oven. When the required temperature was reached, I would remove the smoke bomb cases (with gloves on!), and place them carefully in a bin at the other end.

The Sunshine Waterloo Company employed over five hundred men, and at least the same number of women. One day, an office photographer took a picture of me busy at the oven and another girl welding. The photo appeared in the *Record* to illustrate an article on the Sunshine Waterloo Company. A few months later, I was asked to represent the ammunition workers in the upcoming Victory Loan parade from Waterloo to Kitchener. A man from the tool room also represented the company. We both wore our Sunshine uniforms.

The parade was impressive. There was a band playing to lead it along King Street to City Hall, and music during the ceremony. Officials spoke over the loudspeakers and the radio, asking the crowd to join the war effort and buy Victory Bonds. There was also a platform for dignitaries and representatives of various organizations – including uniformed army, air force and navy personnel. I bought a 50 dollars Victory Bond, and decided to join the service and do my part for the war.

After the parade, I read in the newspaper that the Canadian navy was recruiting women in Galt, Ontario. I immediately applied, and was accepted into service on January 6, 1943. I gave notice to the Sunshine Waterloo Company, telling them I had joined the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service and was to report for training as a probationary wren. (My starting pay of 90 cents a day would rise to 95 cents after I completed my training).

At the training depot in Galt I was issued a uniform and required to line up for inspection and learn how to march. There were classes to attend every morning, to learn the King's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions. After a month's basic training many of us were sent to the Preston Springs Hotel, a holding place for wrens while they waited to be posted.

One night at the hotel, the alarm sounded and woke us all up. We were on the top floor; and with people panicking, pushing and shoving, it took us a long time to get out of the hotel. When we finally made it outside, our Petty Officer was there looking at her watch. She told us that it was a false alarm, but that we had taken far too long to exit the building – and we had to go back to our rooms and do it over again! This time, when we heard her whistle, we were to form a line and exit one by one.

We wrens were finally drafted to Ottawa, Vancouver, Toronto or Halifax. I was sent to Halifax. We left in April, and the steam-train trip was a three-day event. At Montréal we changed to a slow train that stopped at every station along the route. The trains emitted so much soot and smoke that we were constantly brushing off our uniforms when we boarded or disembarked!

We finally got to Halifax in the pouring rain, during a blackout all over the city. A wren in a panel truck picked us up and drove slowly through the darkened streets to Stadacona Naval Base. We had to wait quite a while in that cold, rainy blackout to receive our bunk assignments, and I was already suffering from a chill after sitting up for two nights on the train with hardly any sleep. When I woke up the next morning, I had a fever and had to go to the sick bay. They took me on a stretcher into the hospital hut in Stadacona, and the doctor who examined me said I was a very sick person. I was worried that I had ruined my new career, and the war would be over before I recovered.

But I got better quickly, and reported for duty as a messenger in the dockyard naval offices. I practically lived in my sou'wester hat and raincoat, as the Maritime spring weather was incredibly rainy. I found the task challenging: I had to memorize dozens of abbreviated terms, since I was never allowed to carry notes. But on the plus side, being in the dockyards meant there were lots of ships to watch. The *Queen Elizabeth*, *Queen Mary* and the *Mauritania* were quite a sight! I grew quite familiar with seeing the little tugs in the harbour tugging along with long lines attached to the big ocean liners, to bring them close to the jetty so they could dock.

At one point, the English battleship *HMS Renown* docked in our harbour, and we wrens jumped at the crew's invitation to go aboard and have tea with them. We enjoyed their charming manners, not to mention their lavish spread of food! The men also invited several of us to a dance at the 'Y' depot near where they were stationed. I went with my friend Florie Conquergood, another wren from Winnipeg.

In the main section of the Stadacona building was a bulletin board listing rules, employment needs, sports events and so on. One day I read that two wrens were required in the Manual Office, so I applied for a transfer and got one of the jobs. A Petty Officer was in charge of the Manual Office, and two of us wrens did the work. The other person selected was Marie Guité, a bilingual wren from Gaspé.

Whenever naval personnel returned from ships or sick bay they had to call in at the Manual Office for instructions, since we had the copies relating to their placements. Some sailors were quite surprised to see wrens working there – especially Marie, who was blonde, very pretty and spoke with a French accent. The two of us decided to take advantage of the free courses offered to service people by the Canadian Legion. I enrolled in German and typing, Marie in Spanish. She progressed quite well in her Spanish; I improved only in typing!

Work at the Manual Office could get quite harried. Halifax was a very busy port: often a sailor would arrive on one ship, report to us, and be redrafted immediately to another ship. Sometimes the orders were delayed, and we had line-ups in the office. (When this happened, sometimes the waiting men would cause trouble, acting loud on purpose to disturb our concentration. Our Petty Officer had to intervene.) When things got really busy, the Petty Officer was occasionally able to assign a qualified person from sick bay to help ease the volume of work.

Checking the bulletin board again, I noticed that the Atlantic Combined Headquarters (ACHQ) was opening in downtown Halifax, across from the Nova Scotia Hotel. The ACHQ was an important signal alert establishment, and the notice called for wrens to fill a variety of positions: typists, coders, plotters, wireless/telegraph transmitters, and operators for cipher, teletype and ditto machines.

So I requested a transfer to ACHQ, and started working in signal communications along with several other wrens. There were three shifts around the clock: 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., 4 p.m. to 12 a.m., and 12 a.m. to 8 a.m. The coding and ciphers room was established, as was the W/T room; typists were selected for the teletype and Type X section; and then plotting was filled. Once all the departments were at capacity, the shifts (or "watches") were organized. I started off on the C watch, operating the Type X machine. This was a coding machine: you typed the message in English, the apparatus created the signal, and it came out in code. It could also transform coded messages back into English.

I worked in the Type X room for a year, and had an interesting time. When signal messages were placed in the basket for us to type, I would select the indicators used to start and end the signal. The indicators varied with what kind of signal it was: routine, important or emergency. The coded tape that came out of the machine was like a telegram, and it was pasted onto a signal sheet and put in the out basket. We marked the signal papers "O and P" for Important; and each one was signed with its time of origin and time of dispatch – which was "Zulu" time, three hours ahead of actual time. ("Z" time is military standard time, so that all units can be synchronized.)

All the messages we sent at ACHQ went to the Admiralty as well as into the Plotting Room, where there was a big wall map dotted with markers showing the location of every ship in the Atlantic – everything from convoys and minesweepers to troop ships. There would usually be a wren on a ladder there, repositioning the markers as signals came in from the various ships.

Once as I was typing a coded message, the tape read: "Most Secret: Sub sighted." It included degrees and vicinity. I realized that this must be an emergency signal, although it did not have a red tag attached to signify the speed for the message to be delivered. I immediately found the Signals Officer before finishing the signal, as "Most Secret" messages required an officer to be present. He took the message; and ten minutes later a red-tagged signal paper appeared in the signals basket. I typed in English, "Most Secret – Alert to all ships," and their orders, most likely to avoid the area of the Atlantic where the submarine was.

My supervisor was Ann Walker, a kind, pleasant person who took care of "her girls," as she called us. She knew that I took my work seriously, and also that I chummed with the teletype wrens. Once when she was conversing with the Signal Officer, she found that he needed another teletype operator. So she proposed me for the job, and I started working in the teletype room. I caught onto the procedures there fairly easily. The messages were coded five-letter or -number groups, running the length of the signal paper. There were five teletypes, one for each "circuit": Ottawa, Newfoundland, Albro Lake, Halifax Station and the combined American-Canadian circuit. Each machine had its own in and out baskets to hold the high volume of messages. In the far corner of the room, another teletype was hooked up to England via an undersea cable. It would start operating when a message required confirmation, such as when the *Queen Mary* had landed.

After a while, the volume of teletype signals increased and it was decided that a supervisor should stay in the room. We operators were given the opportunity to take turns filling that role. Then a small group of wrens was sent to the St.Hyacinthe Signal School for a two-week course on tape transmission. I was with them, and passed the course qualifying me for a supervisor's position back at ACHQ.

In the meantime, my friend Florie was working in the cipher department, where most of her signals were Most Secret. Once when we were both working on the midnight shift Florie came into the teletype room, stopped at the machine where I was working and slipped a folded piece of paper into my hand as she said a quick hello. (Office rules were very strict about not loitering or chatting at our work stations.) When I read the note on my break, Florie said that after our shift, at 8 a.m., we should take the tram to the North West Arm canoe club where there was a beautiful view of the Halifax harbour – and the *Queen Mary* was leaving for England at 0900 hours.

Of course this was secret information, so I tore her note into many pieces and threw them out. Still, on the bus on our way to the harbour, we both felt that the secret was written across our faces! We sat on the grass at the seaside and waited and watched; and sure enough, at 9 a.m. the big ocean liner left the harbour, gliding perfectly smoothly through the water. We knew that she was loaded with troops headed for England. We watched the *Queen Mary* until she was just a grey speck on the horizon, then went home to sleep. It was calming to see the friendly Halifax people getting on and off the bus and going about their business, unaware of our inner turmoil.

Another time on the midnight watch, the office seemed tranquil until 2 a.m. or so, when messages began pouring into our baskets and all the machines went into operation. Florie from the cipher department stopped by my machine again, and told me that the *HMCS Athabascan* had been hit by an enemy submarine and sunk. The sailors went overboard into the water, which was covered with burning oil, and many lives were lost. We could only keep working steadily, typing signals in code, until the end of our watch. We knew there were few survivors, but we couldn't dwell on such incidents.

In February 1944, a Landing Ship Tank from the U.S. put in at Halifax for repairs. It had been damaged after leaving New York to join the flotilla going to England in preparation for D-Day. While the ship was being repaired, the crew of LST 283 arranged a dance at the Nova Scotia ballroom. The orchestra was playing when I arrived at the ballroom with my friend Claire Murray, a coder at ACHQ. A naval captain asked Claire to dance, and the lieutenant beside him asked me. We spent every dance together for the remainder of the evening. He was twenty-six years old, from Florida, and his name was Lieutenant Robert Crouch.

Over the next few months, he and I went out together quite a bit and we became great friends. We ate every meal together when we could, working around my work schedule – even though officers were not supposed to be seen with ratings at Stadacona, and we had to meet at the base exit. Once he asked me to have supper with him on LST 283. I found myself in the Officer's Mess, seated at a long table with the captain and half a dozen officers. (I particularly recall the fresh strawberries and juicy pineapple.) And he gave me a tour of the LST. In the front bow I saw two huge caterpillar tanks, which were supposed to roll out onto Normandy Beach. Lt. Crouch and I shared many more dates before he sailed out, as did my friend Claire with the captain.

The time before D-Day was a busy one, and us wrens were kept busy. One day in June, a friend and I came into the fo'c'sle living room to find Claire holding a newspaper, distraught and crying. She told us that our beloved LST 283 had been sunk at Normandy Beach on D-Day, and the captain she loved had been killed.

As news of the invasion kept coming, it listed several LSTs and tanks that had been lost – some of them never even managing to get onto the beach because of enemy gunfire. But many months later, an airmail letter from England arrived for me. It was from Lieutenant Crouch! He had survived the tragic sinking of LST 283, and was now convalescing in hospital. In his letter, he referred to our time together as "a little piece of heaven."

On New Year's Eve 1944, a W/T signal station about fifty miles from Halifax invited us to a dance party. The sailors provided coffee and refreshments for us, and we had fun. Afterwards, singing and harmonizing, we wrens headed home in two naval vans. We were unaware of the icy weather conditions until we left, and drove cautiously along the snow-banked highway.

All of a sudden, our van swung around, spun twice and hit the side of the highway with a thud. I had been sitting in the centre of the seats that ran along each side; and the next thing I knew, I was smothering in the middle of a snowbank. My first thought was of my mother, and what she would think when told I had died in a snowbank. But gradually, I moved my arms and was able to try to climb out. I heard voices and Florie calling out for me. I was stunned, but happy to see that my friend was okay.

We were shaken up, but all the wrens were accounted for. Only one woman was injured; she had landed on her knees on the edge of the gravelled highway. The other van circled back to shine its lights on us and give us assistance. The van was put into position again, and we all climbed back in and continued on our way back to Stadacona – though no one seemed to want to sing again.

I was due for leave from the teletype office when a telegram arrived from my sister, saying to come home at once since our mother was ill. I arrived in Toronto to find mom in the hospital, diagnosed with a tumour in her head and scheduled for an operation. But next day, the doctors told me that the tumour was situated so close to the brain area that there was a risk of a stroke or even instant death. They decided not to operate. Mom was given sedative treatment, and her condition improved enough to enable her to return home. (She lived for 10 more years before passing away at age fifty-nine).

I stayed at home to help mom until she got stronger. During this time, I received a notice from Halifax telling me that after my leave, I was drafted to Prince Rupert, British Columbia, to work in the teletype room. But I knew I was needed at home, so I asked the Service for a compassionate discharge. I did feel sad that I was unable to go to Prince Rupert, though – the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbour on December 1941, and the West Coast required surveillance. But I got my compassionate discharge, along with a promotion to Leading Wren – with retroactive pay, which I was happy to receive.

Soon the war was over. I had been corresponding with some other ex-wrens who had been at ACHQ with me and now lived in Toronto. In November, since my mother now had other help, I decided to go there too; and found a job doing accounts payable. With some friends, I joined the YWCA. On Saturday nights, there were dances for ex-service people; and at one of these I met Albert George Menard.

He asked me to dance, we had an interesting conversation, and he walked me home.

He had served in the RCAF aircrew and later in the Canadian Infantry Corps. Like many other discharged men, he had been accepted into University, in an engineering course; but had to wait two years because there was such a backlog of people. In the meantime, he had taken a job as a machinist, manufacturing press cameras. We dated for a year, found ourselves quite compatible, and were married in Kingston on September 6, 1948.

We had a family of eight, four daughters and four sons. One daughter and one son served in the militia; and James later went on to work for the Department of National Defence in the Naval Division as a Systems Design Engineer. We are pleased to see that things have come full circle, and the Canadian navy is still being served by one of our offspring.

I hope that my memory of the events I experienced may help to contribute to people's understanding of that period in Canadian history. I felt fortunate to have shared time with such wonderful companions in Halifax, and to have been part of the work at Atlantic Combined Headquarters. It was a terrific establishment of knowledge, and our signal work there kept us abreast of Canada's quest to help win the war.

Phyllis Barron –
née Holmes

When the war started, I was only thirteen and still in school. We lived in England, 10 miles outside of London. My family knew there was going to be a war, a year ahead of time. My dad had a small business, and there were two Jewish refugees among his employees. One day, they told my father about what was happening in Austria and Germany and what had happened to them. My father came home and sat at the dining room table with his head in his hands. He was crying – in those days men didn't cry. He said, "There is going to be a war. There can be no dealing with the Nazi regime because of the terrible evil things they're doing to people. They want to take over the world." That moment has always remained in my memory.

The British government began to issue gas masks to everybody, but millions of people in England still didn't believe there was going to be a war. People could put air raid shelters in their gardens if they wanted – if they couldn't afford one, the government would give it to them for free. My dad decided to have a shelter in our backyard, and many of the neighbours laughed at him.

We were considered to live in a "danger area" because there was an ammunition factory (Plessey's) close by, which could be one of the first places to be bombed. So the day the war started, all us school children had to be evacuated out into the country, taking our suitcases and gas masks with us. A train took us away from our homes; and when we got off the train we all waited in a market square for the people of the town to come and pick us up.

No background checks were done to ensure that the homes were decent, and there were a lot of terrible stories about the bad things that happened to evacuated children. Luckily, my girlfriend and I were both picked by a wonderful couple. When they took us into their house, the man was crying. I didn't know why at the time – things seemed to roll off my back at that age, and I didn't even think about it. It wasn't until I was older that I realized why he was crying, when I had a flashback in my mind's eye of all us children standing there bewildered. (This couple had a very loving home. Much later, when I married, they came to the party.)

That's how the war started for us; but I was only there for three months, because at that time we were in the "phony war" – the period leading up to Dunkirk. I came home before Christmas 1939.

That was the time of the blackouts: all the streetlights were turned off, and everyone had to put dark curtains at all the windows and doors. You couldn't show a light outside. It was scary going out at night, because you couldn't see anything except when the moon was shining. And there were people who attacked others at night. We always carried a flashlight with us, and we learned to stay safe. We would never walk near doorways or trees, for example, in case somebody grabbed you.

Gradually we had to give things up, and rationing got very strict. Everything was on a ration book. There was no petrol; the only people allowed to drive cars were the armed forces and those who needed a car for the war effort. Food was always in short supply. We were very grateful to the merchant navy for always getting food across the Atlantic; but the number of food ships was cut back considerably, and there was limited space on them for food because the

Allies needed raw materials for the war effort – materials England didn't have.

Fortunately, England has a very mild climate, so we were able to grow things year round and produce our own food. The Land Army was recruited to work on the land. Nearly everybody had gardens in their backyards, so we always had vegetables and bread. But that didn't provide foods such as meat, cheese and eggs, which were strictly rationed: every week we were allowed a couple of eggs, two ounces of cheese and a tiny amount of meat. However, through everything, the theatres in London kept playing. We didn't have to give that up!

Nothing much happened in the war until May 1940, when the German army attacked and ran right through Europe. A British expeditionary force that had been sent over was driven back to the sea at Dunkirk, and many were killed or captured. That's when the government asked anyone in England who had a small boat to go across the English Channel and help to pick up the men off the beaches. A friend of my father had a boat, and he went over to help. What hell it must have been, going across in that little boat to try to rescue people with all that shelling and bombing going on. It took three days to accomplish.

About this time, the Nazis started bombing us every night. We slept in our air raid shelter with as many neighbours as could fit in – they weren't laughing at my dad any more. But strangely, despite the bombings, what I remember most clearly was the fun we all had. Well, it had to be fun to get us through everything! We had our sense of humour. I can remember one day when we had a lot of friends and relatives in for a get-together and at night, of course, there was an air raid. Nobody could go home, so everyone grabbed a pillow and lay down on the living room floor. We tried to sleep, but couldn't because of all the jokes going back and forth.

And nothing stopped us teenagers from going on with our lives – we would even go out during the air raids. We had learned that when shells from the anti-aircraft guns went up, the shrapnel from the shell took a certain time to come down. So we would listen to the guns carefully, then run like heck to get where we were going. Danger became fun to us.

Once during the Blitz, dad and I were out in our backyard when we looked up to see a Spitfire and a Messerschmidt engaged in a dogfight right over our heads. (Unfortunately, the Spitfire was shot down and the enemy got away.) I've often thought since that my dad and I were lucky – where did all the bullets go that were fired by both sides?

At other times during the Blitz, you could read a newspaper outside in our garden at night – it was so bright from the flames of London burning. The Nazis had come over and dropped firebombs in the central area, literally trying to burn the city down. My dad's office was burned down in that raid.

During the war, it was as though there were no civilians in England – we were all part of the war, although we weren't actually in the forces. Everybody tried to do something for the war effort. People were recruited to work in the factories – my mother had to go, but I was too young to get assigned to factory work. So my friend and I had the brilliant idea that we would go to work in a hospital, even though all we had in the way of qualifications was a Red Cross certificate.

They were short-handed, because all the nurses were going into the military to help overseas. We used to go and help on the wards in the evenings – we couldn't do anything medical, but we helped the remaining nurses get the patients ready for the night. They didn't have recovery rooms back then, so if somebody had had an operation we would watch over them as they were coming out of the anaesthetic. If anything happened, we would just yell.

A lot of the road signs were removed, so that if the Germans landed they would have trouble finding their way – though this also made it difficult for us when we went out cycling! As well, the churches couldn't ring their bells, as the government had decided that that was how they would let everyone know if an invasion happened. (But later, on V-E Day, every church bell would ring out!)

When I turned seventeen I could have gone into the forces with my parents' permission, but my dad wouldn't give it – and my mother was particularly opposed. But I was determined to do it anyway, because everyone should be part of the war effort. So on my eighteenth birthday, when I could join up without my dad's consent, I volunteered. It wasn't a case of choosing the army, navy or air force; it was just which service was taking volunteers at that time. I turned 18 in December 1943, and was called up in March 1944.

I was in the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS), which was the women's army. It had started a year or so before the war – rather like the reserves for the men, who went into regular regiments when the war started. I went for basic training to Guildford, in the county of Surrey. We learned how to march and salute, how to deal with gas attacks and that sort of thing. I don't remember having any problem adjusting to army life. Everything was fun to try, and you met so many new people.

Some of the girls were doing jobs as dispatch riders, or helping to operate the anti-aircraft guns. I wanted to join one of those outfits; but unfortunately I had such poor eyesight that neither option was open to me. So I started work as a shorthand typist (my job classification in civilian life) for the Royal Engineers. They were in charge of building and maintaining the defences of Southeast England. My camp was quite close to Dover and the famous white cliffs. But the Germans had an anti-aircraft battery in Calais, France, and they used to bombard Dover on a regular basis.

At this time in the war, the regular bombings stopped when Hitler came out with this secret weapon, the "doodlebug." It was like a rocket, but in the shape of an airplane. The Germans shot them up into the air from their base in Germany, and they would travel all the way across France and the Channel under their own steam. When the engine stopped, the doodlebug would fall to the ground and explode.

One day when I was walking along I heard a noise, looked up – and saw a doodlebug coming over, with a Spitfire chasing after it. I was scared for my life, so I hid and watched in fright as the Spitfire chased the doodlebug and shot it down. The plane left, and I emerged from my "hiding place" – only to realize that this was, in fact, a very thin lamp post! I had to laugh at myself for thinking this slender lamp post was going to protect me; especially since I was sticking out either side quite a bit, being none too slim myself!

On D-Day, as it happened I was at home: I had scarlet fever (there were no antibiotics then). The activity was unbelievable: the stream of tanks, guns and men kept going steadily, all night long, along the coast.

You had to be nineteen to go overseas, so as soon as I reached that age (December 1944) I volunteered. There was no room to sleep on the boat over to Ostend, so thousands of men and about a hundred girls just wandered around the boat wearing our life jackets – each with a little red flashing light. Now that promoted some fun! (The joke was that a German submarine might mistake us for a floating bordello! We had a raw sense of humour.) From Ostend we were driven to Paris and billeted in hotels for the first night. We couldn't believe our luck when we were told that some twenty of us would stay in Paris – we thought we were in heaven! Paris was a fantastic city. There was so much to see and do. (Unfortunately, I never did learn to speak French. Everybody we met saw that we were in uniform, so they automatically spoke to us in English.)

I was assigned to the Medical Corps, and part of my job was phoning the field hospitals and finding out the casualties for the day. Many of these "casualties" were venereal disease! Paris was a leave city, which meant that the men coming in wanted excitement and sex – mostly in the huge brothel area. The rule was if they reported contracting venereal disease, no action was taken against them; but if they didn't report it, they would be penalized. (There were preventative centres all over the city where the men could get free condoms and where they could be treated after visiting the prostitutes.) If they did report having a venereal disease, they had to fill out a form saying where they'd been, so the French authorities could treat the prostitute too. Part of my job was processing these forms – quite a revelation to a nineteen-year-old!

I don't think many people were quite sure what we ATSs were there for. When we first went to Paris, the French citizens assumed that we were there for the men. It didn't help that we were billeted in a hotel – nor (as we found out later) that another hotel on the same street was a very active brothel! People were amazed to find out that when boyfriends came to see us, they had to stay downstairs in the reception area – they were not allowed upstairs in our bedrooms.

However, we women in the army were also treated differently than the men: we were protected, well taken care of, and had privileges that the men didn't. Even our sleeping quarters were different. The men just had blankets to sleep in, while we were always provided with sheets and pillowcases. Care was taken in Europe, especially, that we didn't get into any dangerous situations.

There were army camps all around the Paris area, and they were pretty short of entertainment. They would often send out a message that they wanted to put on a dance, and would the girls please come and dance with them? So a whole bunch of us girls would get together and go out to the camp recreation area and dance.

At one camp, they had set aside a special place for us girls to go to the bathroom. Well, if one girl had to go, we would all go – we never went anywhere alone. But when a group of us decided we had to use the facilities, we were just thunderstruck: there were twenty toilets just sitting out in the open, ten in a row, back to back, with no partitions! So we all sat on the seats and pretended to make loud toilet-going noises – we thought it would be quite funny for anyone walking by to hear a symphony of twenty different toilet sounds! At the time we all thought this hilarious, though it seems kind of vulgar now.

Back at HQ, we had to take turns being on night duty, and there always had to be two of us for our safety. We worked upstairs in the Brigadier's office, and the Signals Corps handled the communications equipment down in the basement. One spring night in 1945 when I was on duty, the Signals guys phoned up to us to come down and look at the teleprinter: they wanted us to see the message that the war was over.

The next morning, as we headed back to our billets, the war in Europe really was over. V-E Day in Paris was quite the experience – the city went crazy with joy! We couldn't walk along the streets for being constantly surrounded by big groups of French people, singing, laughing and offering us champagne. We had to hug and kiss everybody and take a great big drink of champagne. It was unbelievable. I don't remember ever getting back to our billets that day, and I've loved French champagne ever since!

A few weeks later the Allies had a victory march down the Champs Élysées, and I was part of it. There were bands playing and thousands of people cheering. It was the most incredible feeling of my life up till then. What joy, and relief, and hope for the future.

I stayed in Europe for a while after the war, posted first to Brussels and then to Germany. In Brussels I worked for a regular army Brigadier General, who still couldn't believe that they had women in the army now. He was a darling person – he wouldn't call me by my rank (I was a corporal), he just called me "Miss." From Brussels I went to a place called Bielefeld. While we were there, the Allies were having trouble because Germans were hoisting Nazi flags during the night. After all they had gone through, their country defeated and in ruins, some of them were still holding up the Nazi flag! It was scary.

But other than that, Germany was beautiful. They had wide roads and hilly countryside. It was very much like Canada. I hadn't seen Canada at the time, but when I came over here, that's what I thought. It was fun to learn how different people lived.

After Germany we were posted to Calais to run a camp that was routing refugees into England – we were a staging camp on their way to freedom. The Channel is very narrow at that point and when you're standing on the coast you can see the white cliffs loom, even though they're twenty miles away. Those cliffs are a symbol of British freedom and independence. I could imagine how the Germans felt when they were just across the Channel: they were so close, but they couldn't get across.

It wasn't until May 1947 that I left the army. There was a kind of quota system: they only let so many people leave at once, and naturally they started with the first ones in. You had to stay in until your group came out. My transition back to civilian life wasn't difficult. I wasn't all that ambitious; I was young, and I just wanted to have fun, to be happy and enjoy life.

After the war, though, people's mood changed – their attitude was very bad for a while. We all expected that now the war was over, we'd be able to have decent food again and buy things. That didn't happen, because England was so short of money. Times were very hard in England after the war as well. To replenish itself, the country exported everything it produced, mostly to the U.S. Plastics had just been invented, and they were produced and exported like crazy.

You couldn't get a car; all the cars were pre-war. New cars were being manufactured, but not for people to buy: they were all exported. You couldn't find a place to live either – there had been so much bombing, but nothing was rebuilt. So everybody was still short of the things they had been short of before – it was as though the war were still on. This situation lasted for several years, and it was very depressing.

Many people emigrated to Canada during that period, and I was one of them: I married a Canadian. We had met in Paris after the war. The British Military Headquarters there was in a large building that used to be a perfume manufacturer's head office, and one floor was taken over by members of the Canadian military, who had their own separate area. We knew them well enough to say hello, and John Barron was one of them. He went back to Canada and although I'd never wanted to live over here, we finally got things settled between us. We got married and I came to live here. (I wasn't a war bride, though; the strict definition is that you married during the actual wartime, between September 1939 and May 1945.) I've never regretted it for a second. I love it here – though at first Canada was a great shock to me, because I could go out and buy anything I wanted to!

My favourite part of the service was the feeling of camaraderie. You really get to know people when you're thrown together like that – you develop friendships quickly. And those feelings last, there's always that connection. People from the services always share a camaraderie that nobody else seems to have. I'm still friends with the girl I shared a hotel room with in Paris. It's been five decades, and we still correspond – and whenever I go to England, I still visit her.

As well, there was the feeling that women can do anything. Home isn't the only place for a woman to be – you can be out there and make your mark on the world. I'd stand up for anything women want to do – I think women should be able to be pilots or whatever. I see women serving a very important role in the military, as well as in all areas of civilian life.

For the next generation of women going into the military, I would say: Go ahead and try it – do what you want to do! You have a wonderful country. I'm so glad that the government has recently decided to contribute millions for a new war museum. It is our history, and it is so important – it helps people understand what our country really stands for.

Nellie Ross

At the beginning of the war, I was working in a department store in Vancouver and living with my family. When the opportunity came to join up, I decided to. My father had been in the Scots Guards, and we were a military family, so I felt it was my duty to enlist. (My sisters were married and my brother worked in essential services, so they couldn't.) I had worked as a volunteer at the Air House, entertaining the young men from the nearby Jericho Beach Station, so I joined the air force.

After passing my medical and my general knowledge exam I was sent to Toronto, to Havergal College – the Manning Depot where new recruits were sent for basic training. Coming from the West Coast, I only had a raincoat as a winter coat. We western girls laughed when they gave us those high boots, but I was pleased with them when the snows came. I wasn't used to winter!

From Havergal I was sent to St. Thomas for an air force equipment course. After that I was stationed at a Service Flying Training School in Hagersville, Ontario. My duties in the supply section included keeping track of a selection of nuts, bolts, screws and smaller pieces of aircraft equipment for repairs. You signed vouchers for materials, and had to keep a good inventory.

It was quite interesting at first; but I soon became bored and wanted to go to wireless school, since that area had now opened up to women. I asked our Officer Commanding if I could remuster, but he said No, I didn't have enough education. He said I'd probably never get past AW2, so I might as well be satisfied where I was.

Well, it wasn't long before the sergeant brought along a group of vouchers for me to sign – and I refused to, because the equipment had not in fact come from my section. He said I had to sign, because the OC said so. This went back and forth until finally I went up to the OC's office, put down the vouchers and said, "Sir, I will not sign these vouchers. This equipment did not come from my section." So to settle the issue I was quickly remustered as wireless personnel and sent off to the wireless school. I got my way! (I knew the auditors were about to come in, and I hadn't wanted to be involved in anything I didn't approve of.)

I thoroughly enjoyed the wireless course. The school was in Montréal, in a huge building on St. Mary's Road near St. Joseph's Shrine. I was kept on there as an instructor, which I really enjoyed; but eventually I became bored (again!) with my section and asked to be transferred to the equipment section, where I could teach how to use all the equipment used in wireless. I was given the opportunity as a trial for six months, to see how it would work out.

One interesting class I had was a group of British airmen who had been sent to Canada to learn ground wireless work. They were shell shocked and left traumatized after the Battle of Britain. The RAF hadn't simply discharged them, because that would have left them in a mental state of despair. Instead, it sent them to us and told us to treat them with "kid gloves," which I did.

Some of my memories of them are actually quite funny. Several times I came to the classroom in the morning and there would be only one lad sitting there. He'd say, "Ma'am, the boys are out behind the hangar – it's such a nice day, can you hold classes out there?" So we'd go outside, and spend many hours having our classes in the sun and picnicking. They passed their course beautifully and I was very proud of them. They returned to England as happy young men.

After six months the CO called me into his office and said, "Ross, I'm very proud of your work. Even though you don't have the education, I think you'd do well in the officer's training course." He asked me if I was willing to take on the task. I thanked him and said yes, I would give it a try and do my best.

I went to Winnipeg for the wireless course. It was very difficult: you had to know your calculus to figure out your area lengths. Compared to the equipment available now, the stuff we had then was very primitive: our transmitters were huge monstrous beasts, and our receivers nearly as large. We still used tubes. But we worked with them, did our math and passed the course.

One of its enjoyable aspects was that we were required to put in ten hours of flying time to pass our course. We flew in small planes, Cornels, with the pilot in the rear and a wireless operator in the front. I loved flying; after being a wireless operator on the ground, it was a treat to be up in the air.

When I was finished, I went to Trenton for officer training. We were a tired bunch by then, and the picture I have of us there certainly shows that. There were some young men at the base who had just returned from a horrible Japanese death march, and we didn't look much better than them!

After finishing the course I was promptly sent out to Eastern Air Command in Halifax. My duties there included using radar and sonar, which were new to me. I worked with another fellow, and he and I would go over to Dartmouth to install the sonar and radar into aircraft there.

One lovely day I went off to Annapolis Valley to see the apple blossoms. I returned to find my room garlanded with toilet paper. "See the Adjutant right away," a sign said. "You've been posted overseas!" So off I went on my embarkation leave. (In those days, you couldn't just send a telegram saying you were going on embarkation leave; you had to make it very civilian-sounding. So I said that I was coming home for a holiday, and would visit Auntie Nell on the return journey. My Auntie Nell was in England, so I thought this would let my family know where I was going.)

I was glad to leave Halifax, which was too much a navy town for me. When I first arrived, there wasn't room for me in the women's quarters on the station, so I had to find myself a place off-base. There would be signs posted saying: "Room for rent, service personnel only." But they should have written "Navy only!" The homeowners would take one look at me in my air force uniform and say the room was taken. This happened many times. They finally squeezed me in back at the base, since I had to live somewhere; but Halifax was not a wonderful memory as far as I was concerned.

We boarded the *Empress of Scotland* to go overseas – the new model, as the original *Empress* had been torpedoed. (I was familiar with the ship, since back in peacetime she and her sister ship *Empress of Japan* had both plied their way from Vancouver harbour to the Orient. The Chief Engineer was a friend of the family, and we had gotten to know many of the *Empress's crew* – including the Chief Steward, who was on this trip. Quite a coincidence.)

After being shown our quarters, we were told to come on deck to be addressed by the captain and to have boat drill. If the boat was torpedoed we were to go to the lifeboats, but if there was an air raid we were to go to our quarters. We were told to keep our life jackets with us at *all* times, and not to sit on them or use them as cushions. (I'm afraid not everyone obeyed those orders!)

The troops had mopped the deck and I was standing there with two old friends, Ron Gadsby and Chuck Hutchinson. They were public relations officers for the air force. As we sailed out of harbour the submarine gates opened for us, and Ron said: "Isn't this exciting!" Yes, I thought, in a perverse sort of way. But off we were, on our way to England.

The trip was slow but uneventful, very foggy with a calm sea. We were told not to throw anything overboard, not even a match, as that might alert the German submarines to our whereabouts. There were over ten thousand people on that ship, so you can understand the lack of water and food. To me, the lack of water was the worst: you only had a cupful to drink everyday, and none to bathe in. There was tea or coffee at your wish, but the food was hardly palatable – and we only got two meals a day, in the early morning and at six o'clock at night.

It was fortunate that I knew the Chief Steward, because he would invite me down to his quarters for lunch. He wouldn't be there, because he was working; but I would have lunch in his quarters, and then his man would give me a case filled with sandwiches and a little bottle of wine. I would go back and share this with my friends. I was quite popular! Sometimes they would break their sandwiches in half and give that to someone else. Everybody shared and shared alike.

As we finally neared Ireland, the air-raid warning sounded. An aircraft came out, straight at the ship; but our gunner on board shot him down and we were safe. When we finally got to Liverpool, we had to wait for the tide and then go in at a fast clip. Then we found out that the train that had been waiting dockside for all the troops on board our ship had been bombed the night before, and was lying in ruins. We had to head into the centre of town and get a train there.

We were supposed to be going to the reception area at Bournemouth, and I was excited: I was born there and still had relatives there, including Auntie Nell. But it turned out that Bournemouth had been bombed too. So here we were, sitting on a train with nowhere to go. We ate American box rations (they were very good) while a decision was made; and finally we were taken to Cheltenham.

I wasn't at the reception area for long before I was sent to the Canadian Bomber Group Command at Linton-on-Ouse, in Yorkshire. This was a dispersal station, so no personnel would be at the same place at the same time. As Signals Officer, every morning I would decode the secret messages and write them out on pieces of rice paper. I'd give them to the wireless boys when they were out in the aircraft on the rig. This was so that if the planes were shot down, they could eat the rice paper so it wouldn't fall into enemy hands – it really was top secret!

The food there left a lot to be desired. I remember rainbow-coloured meat that had come from Australia and looked as though it had been sitting in the sun for hours. And turnips – turnips, turnips and runny custard! My relatives in Scotland used to send me great boxes of kippers, so I was always popular at our house. Once the CO asked if I would give him just one of my kippers. I told him to gather some of the men together, and gave the cook the whole box to prepare for them. Again I was very popular.

At that time, the aircraft we used were Halifaxes and Lancasters – huge four-engined bombers manned by brave young men. They were so young! Sometimes they would arrive fresh and would go out on the rig for the first time. When they returned, some would be quite upset by the damage to their planes. They were taken to hospital and given something to quiet them, but that didn't work; so the Padre would take them to the mess for a few shots of whisky, then escort them to their quarters and put them to bed. They would sleep like babies and wake the next morning feeling fine.

But we lost many crews, and this was most saddening. The boys would want to show us pictures of their wives and children; and eventually we said, "No, thank you. I don't want to look at them – if anything happens to you, I won't want to remember who you left." They couldn't understand this.

We were kept busy: there were no shifts, we were on duty continuously. If we weren't doing our own duties, we would be asked to help make sandwiches in the Mess Hall for the next raid going out – there was barely time for them to have a meal. Or you would be asked to go to the bomb dump and string incendiary bombs. The strain and stress were great, so when you did have time to hit the sack you were just worn out. Air raids that went wrong caused many not to return, but we worked on and on.

Sometimes, though, I just had to get off the station. The first time I finally managed to beg a day off, I rode off on my bicycle and found a beautiful farm with haystacks and a bank sloping down to the River Ouse, all grassy and green. "What a great place to lie down in the sun," I thought. I parked my bicycle next to the haystack, took my shoes off, wiggled my toes in the grass, lay down and went to sleep.

I was awakened by a great thundering. I thought, Oh my gosh, is it an earthquake? Then along came a huge Clydesdale horse, galloping at full speed towards me! I had nowhere to run to, so I stayed still; and the great beast stopped about four yards in front of me. He threw up his head, whinnied, then came closer and nuzzled me, nearly knocking me to the ground. Then he turned on his heels and ran away again as fast as he had come.

I decided it was time to go, so I put on my shoes and went to get my bicycle. But when I reached the haystack I was attacked by a flock of geese, their necks straight out, charging and hissing! After three or four runs around the haystack I finally got ahead of them, grabbed my bicycle and ran up the bank onto the road. I was pleased they didn't follow me!

By this time I was parched and decided to see what they had in the town. I found a nice-looking pub, but the doors were closed. (In England at that time pubs were always closed, by law, between noon and 4 p.m. – the British government had very strict licencing hours.) So I went around to the house next door and asked the lady there if the pub was going to open, or if there was anywhere else I could go to get something to drink? She said there wasn't any other place in town, but that her husband ran the pub – and he was out back. Go around the back door, she said, and she was sure he'd give me a pint. So there I was, sitting on barrels of beer having a drink with a very pleasant Yorkshireman.

As I cycled back to base, I heard a great roar. What now?! I thought. Then I realized that I was about to cross the Great North Road, and that a convoy was nearly upon me. So I stayed. There were tanks, guns on lorries, tanks on lorries and trucks full of men. The huge convoy roared and roared by as I waited beside my bicycle – it took a good hour and a half for it to pass. I was late by the time I returned to base, but no one said much. That was quite an eventful first day off!

Shortly after that, I was sent to RCAF Leeming, one of our satellite bases, to replace the Signals Officer there – he was finding the strain too much, and was sent to London for a desk job. I liked Leeming as much as I had liked Linton-on-Ouse. I had three male friends there whom I had known back in Vancouver, and we were quite pleased to be able to renew our friendship. They were all pilots, and we used to go out pub-crawling at times.

Leeming was a permanent RAF base in peacetime, so there were married quarters there and we girls had our own house. After settling in our billets I went over to the main officers mess to see what was going on. I saw three RCAF officers sitting in the rotunda with a WAAF officer, and asked what they were doing there. They told me that an RAF Squadron Officer had informed them that they were not allowed inside the mess. I said that was wrong: the RCAF was not an auxiliary service as the WAAF was, it was a division of the Royal Air Force, and they could go into the mess if they wanted to. They were reluctant; but I said that I wasn't going to sit out there and have the steward bring me my drinks. I was going to go in and meet the fellows at the bar. I went in, and received a great cheer. It took some doing, but after a while the RCAF boys joined me.

On this station too, I was responsible for all the equipment that went into the aircraft and repair shops. When the wireless operators were debriefed after a mission, they would advise us whether their wireless equipment was working properly or not – sometimes the planes would run into flak, and the equipment would get damaged. But there was a good crew of technicians there, so the equipment was always on par when the boys took off.

One day when I was Orderly Officer, the Adjutant asked me to go out to the reception area and receive a new crew of men just coming in from Canada. I got on my bicycle and arrived there just as they were getting off the transport truck. As they disembarked, their Warrant Officer came over and asked me who I was.

"I am the Orderly Officer, and I will show you where your quarters are," I said.

Just then, the air raid siren went off. The warrant officer became very agitated "Where do we go?" he asked.

"Nowhere," I responded.

"Don't you have air raid shelters?" he asked.

"See those bumps of grass on the ground?" I said. "They're air raid shelters, but they're full of water – so there's nowhere to go. Just close your eyes if you can't take it."

He gulped and looked queasy. But we always felt quite secure there, because no sooner were any German aircraft in sight than the RAF would be out sending them back.

Sometimes over the radio, Lord Haw-Haw used to taunt us. He would say, "Oh you whisky-drinking Canadians, I see all your bombers are on the ground, all weather-bound? We'll be over tonight and all of that will make a lovely bang." I was never sure if he was friend or foe, because he always warned us of the raids. The RAF was always alert and we were never harmed. It was always a comfort to hear the RAF fighters come to our rescue.

Sometimes in bad weather, an American squadron would have to land at our station. The pilots would come and report to us, so we could get their aircraft and squadron, and we were usually able to billet them for a few days until they could get back to their own base. They were an odd lot: they never left their rooms. We'd say, "Come on over to the mess and have a drink," and they'd respond that they were on a mission and didn't drink. Old Lord Haw-Haw may have called us "whisky-drinking Canadians," but I seldom saw anyone put back more than two or three drinks – and then they were off to bed. Everyone was too tired or too stressed to party.

One of the few times I ever needed a drink myself was when two of my pilot friends didn't come back after a raid. I sat up in the Ops room the whole night waiting for word, but we were never to see them again. One was Charles McEchen from Richmond, B.C., and the other was Billy Watson from Toronto. They were dear friends, and I missed them terribly. Our third friend, Frank McCarthy from Toronto, had been on leave in London and was most sad when he heard the news. He and I went out and had a few drinks.

Once I was in Debriefing after the planes had come back from a raid, asking the pilots about their aircraft and squadron and recording the information for future use. I was looking down at my ledger when a booming American voice answered my question with, "B-22, Ma'am."

"What the hell are you doing here?" I asked.

"Well, Ma'am, it was like this. I was over the Channel and lost my squadron, and then your boys came along, so I thought I might as well go where they were going."

"But," I said, "How did you know where they were going? You weren't on our frequencies."

"No, Ma'am; but when they opened their bomb doors, I opened mine; when they dropped their bombs, I dropped mine; and when they came home, I came home with them – so here I am. I hope you won't be mad at me."

I sent him on to see the CO. I expect he would be reported missing by this time, so someone would be glad to see him back.

I was sent to an RAF station near Wolverhampton for a course upgrade: radar was in its infancy, and we had to keep up with the Germans. As they advanced, we advanced. You had to know all the new techniques. At that mess, you were seated according to rank: the higher ranks at one end of the mess, all the way down to the lowly flying or pilot officers at the other. Our messes didn't treat their people like that. One of the higher-ups there was a British war hero. He had his own seat, and no one was allowed to turn on BBC Radio until he arrived. Then he would take his time giving us the news. He was a pain in the neck!

In August 1945 we had heard rumours that the war was ending, but nothing definite; and so our aircraft went out on another raid. Again, some did not come back. Then before the evening was over, a group from the CBC arrived at our mess wanting to celebrate V-J Day with us. We were most annoyed. If they had come all the way from Canada knowing that the war was ending, then why had we not been told? As it was, we sent out that last raid and lost some more of our boys. It was most disturbing, and we kicked them out of the mess. We didn't want their music or celebrating – we didn't celebrate that day.

We went off to Liverpool to catch our ship home; and lo and behold, it was the *Empress of Scotland* again. I was amazed at how quickly we reached the St. Lawrence River, compared to our first crossing. Then I was told the reason it had taken us so long then: we were such a fast ship that we had been used to lure the German subs away from the convoys. I was glad they hadn't told me that at the time!

When we reached Quebec City, we all hung over the ship's dockside railing, looking over the side at the cars and people below. Then the captain announced, "You're capsizing us! – will you please walk slowly to the centre of the ship." Being good troops, we did; and the ship righted itself again.

Being home again was rather difficult. It was wonderful to see my family again, but I was let down with such a thump. All that activity overseas – and here there was nothing to do. I used to cry myself to sleep every night, which was new for me because I wasn't the crying type. I went for my release through the medical centre at Jericho Beach, and was honourably released into the Reserves. I spent the years between 1946 and 1951 working there part-time. It was interesting work and kept me in the spin of things, as well as making the let-down easier. I was also involved with the female Air Cadets – my friend Cherry Hall was in charge of them. She was the first female aero-engine mechanic in the Women's Division.

I tried working again at my old civilian position in the department store, but didn't find it very interesting. I asked the government to send me to art school, which had to be commercial. For four years I did a lot of catalogue work and such mundane things; and again I became bored. Newspaper ads were not my forte.

So in 1951 I re-entered the air force, which was then signing people up for five years, and off I went to Trenton. Vice-Marshal Slemon was in charge, but we saw little of the headquarters people – some airwomen working there found it very stiff, though I enjoyed the company of my senior officers. I was now Housing Officer for the base, responsible for dealing out houses to the families who had just been transferred to our station.

It was quite an odd job. The houses were segregated by rank: there was Wing Commander's Row, Squadron Leader's Row, Lieutenant's Row, Flying Officer's Row, Sergeant Major's Row and Sergeant's Row. The children took on the rank of their parents. What little snobs they were! – they would fight with the children from the other ranks, and not allow them onto their street. I was disgusted with this, and thought I should put a stop to it. So as people were posted in, I would put the sergeants in Flying Officer's Row, the flying officers in Squadron Leader's Row, flight lieutenants in Wing Commander's Row, and so on – I had them all mixed up! And nobody complained.

In 1953, the Coronation Parade took place in Ottawa. There were to be four squadrons of airwomen from the different stations, sixty in a flight, and it was a twelve-mile route. We practiced hard for that parade. I convinced the officers of the other flights that we should be the lead flight, as we were practically all re-entries – we knew the route, and knew how to march in a parade. (The women from headquarters in Ottawa wouldn't march; they didn't think they could manage twelve miles.) Leading our group was a little man who was always tripping over his sword – I don't think he had ever been on a route march in his life. He kept getting tangled up with the squadron ahead of him. Fortunately, I soon lost him.

As we approached the service women on the stand, I said over my shoulder to the girls: "Watch for it." Then I gave the stand a left-handed salute, which was quite unorthodox. The women there stood up and cheered with a mighty roar, which I enjoyed very much! I don't think they had ever seen a left-handed salute before, either.

Then in 1953 I was told I was posted back overseas, going to England for a two-year tour of duty with the NATO forces. Since I was sailing on a civilian ship, my sister decided to quit her job and come with me – we enjoyed each other's company on the way over. Arriving in Liverpool this time was quite different from arriving there during the war: there was a transport waiting for me, and a note from my friend Sheila Strang: "Welcome to this right little, tight little island. Hurry to the station, Gary Cooper is here for the Air Force Day celebrations!"

Sure enough, at North Luffenham station, Gary Cooper was there. After the mess dinner, the officers'wives were allowed to come and celebrate with us – and of course they mobbed Gary! He finally asked me if there was any place he could hide. We sat in the mess storage room for a few drinks; then I took Gary to see the airwomen, who were celebrating in their own mess. He was just wonderful: he danced with them all, and they were polite and nice as all good airwomen were.

Then we took Gary on a pub crawl. He was so tall that he couldn't sit straight in our small English cars, and had to sit sideways. Later, I kidded him: "You know, Gary, you're the biggest fraud."

"What do you mean?" he said.

"You don't act, you're just yourself."

"Oh, so I don't act," he said.

"No," I replied. "You're Gary, and that's how you appear on the screen."

He found this quite amusing. "Gee, after all my work," he replied.

While I was in England, I wanted to buy a car – but although the war had been over for eight years, the salesman told me there was still a ten-year waiting list. He said he could get me one from France or Germany, though, if I paid in American dollars. So I did and got a beautiful little car, green with red upholstery. The English countryside was beautiful, but driving through town always puzzled me. On my days off I'd go into Nottingham and would always get stuck in the roundabout, driving in circles and unable to find my way out! The same patient policeman would always heave a sigh and help me out again. (He once said, "Can't you stay home when I'm on duty!?")

On one occasion, I went to Oxford with one of the nursing sisters. We were dressed in civilian clothes, good tweed suits in the English style. But what snobs we encountered – they seemed to want us to get off the sidewalks for them! We went to a hotel for dinner; but the waiter decided that we weren't properly dressed, and ignored us. I was beginning to wonder if we would ever get a table when a large RAF party came in – the men were in uniform and the women in long dresses. One officer kept looking at the nursing sister; then he came over and said, "Haven't I met you before?"

"Yes, sir," I replied. "You were at our base one day."

"Why won't they serve you dinner?" he asked. "I see them passing you over time after time."

I explained the situation. The waiter was very surprised to see this high-ranking officer with us, and we were soon given service.

When I finished my two-year stint, I decided to take a Mediterranean cruise to the Greek Islands before heading home. Then I received a letter from the travel company saying that the cruise had been extended: there might be a war between Greece and Turkey, and the English aristocrats who normally took this trip thought they might not get the opportunity the next year. I told my CO that this meant I couldn't go on the trip; and he said, "We'll see you when you get back." So away I went on a wonderful cruise.

When I got back, my CO told me I could go to France for another two-year tour of duty. But I declined, and went home to Canada. We crossed the Atlantic in one of the last of the Cunard liners – it was very old and uncomfortable. Once I woke up in the middle of the night to silence – there was no engine noise, and we couldn't be in Canada already. I dressed and went on deck to find the whole crew there working on the instruments.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Take a good look at the horizon," one of the men said. I did, and there was an iceberg the size of a skyscraper! It seemed our engines had gone dead, we were drifting towards the iceberg, and the crew was trying to figure out how much time was left before a collision. Luckily, before that happened our engines were restarted, and we were away.

After arriving home, I was stationed at the RCAF station in St. Johns, Quebec. I was there from 1955 to 1956; and then I turned forty-six, the age of retirement from the air force, so I had to retire. I was released honourably and received a wonderful letter from Air Marshal Slemon, thanking me for my long years of service. It was beautifully written, and I prize it very much.

The air force suggested that with my Signals training, I should apply to the B.C. Telephone Company for work. But when I arrived for a job interview, the person across the desk from me turned out to be the man I had replaced back at Leeming during the war – the one who had found the strain too much for him! He said he couldn't hire me because I didn't have enough education.

I said, "Well, sir, I may not have the education, but we've met before."

"I don't remember," he said. "Where did I meet you?"

"Overseas during the war," I replied. "I replaced you when you were sent to take a desk job in London." He became very angry, and I left.

After that I applied to the National Employment Service, was accepted, and worked there until I retired.

Reminiscing back through my service years, I think the airwomen did a bang-up job. They performed duties that released the men for other front-line tasks. They were the first ones in and the last ones out. I was very proud of them. Personally, I worked myself all the way up from AW2 to Flight Lieutenant. I earned my ranks, and I enjoyed them. I also enjoyed working with hundreds of men – at times I was the only woman there. But they were always courteous and friendly, and respected us. I think that respect has changed nowadays, because women are required to act like men. We were always treated like ladies, and hopefully we acted that way.

I learned a lot over the course of my service career, but one important thing I learned about was relationships. You met a variety of people, with all their differences, together in one group; and we had to learn to get along. It amazed me how well we got along: we were all in the war effort together. I found these skills most beneficial in my civilian life, and thoroughly enjoyed my time in the air force.

Elizabeth Victoria 'Vicki' La Prairie –
née Wickham

When the war started, I was working as a bilingual secretary in Montréal and living with my parents. Two of my five brothers enlisted in the air force – one of them transferred to the Fleet Air Arm, and both ended up serving overseas. (My other brothers were too young to join up.)

Then the Navy Show came to Montréal – a musical and variety stage production, put together to boost the morale of civilians and troops. (Captain Joe Connolly, Director of Special Services for the Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserves (RCNVR) had conceived the idea.) I still remember many of the songs from the show, especially *You'll Get Used To It* – I found out later that this summed up navy life perfectly! I was attracted to the uniforms too, and felt that I had found what I was meant to do: join the navy! This was it for me. After I enlisted, I could hardly wait to be called up.

It was wonderful to be part of the war effort. Although we weren't paid much – about 9 dollars a week (a dollar more when I became a Leading Signaller), our uniforms were supplied, our meals were covered, and our trips paid for (except for holidays, of course). And we wrens thought only of doing our bit for the war. Those who weren't in the services worked in factories or sent things over to the troops. There were all kinds of ways to help.

When I first joined I didn't know anything about the various branches, just that I wanted to join the navy. I was called up to become a Wireless Telegrapher. The first stage was basic training, which all the wrens went through at Galt, Ontario. However, as soon as I learned what the other options were, I decided I very much wanted to be a Visual Signaller instead. The next course for that branch was two months away – and talk about red tape! You can't imagine what I went through to transfer! In the meantime, they made me a Messenger. I was sent with messages all over the Signals School, HMCS St-Hyacinthe, in Quebec. I would also go to the train station to meet the other wrens who were posted in from all over Canada to be trained as Wireless Telegraphers, Coders or Visual Signallers like myself.

But I'd only been doing that for a short time when I was called into Captain O'Brien's office. "Wren Wickham, I see by your credentials here that you're a trained secretary," he said. "We're desperately in need of someone to teach our sailors typing – in their work, some of them need to be able to type up messages. We want you to do the job."

"Oh, no," I thought, "I didn't join the navy to become involved with typing!"

But he put it in such a way that I couldn't refuse, even though I told him, "I have no training as a teacher."

"Oh, you'll make it, you'll do!" he responded. "You'll find you won't have any problems – and if you do, you come right to me with the culprit."

So there I was with a bunch of sailors, all about my age, and no training. I was given a room full of typewriters, and a manual to teach from. Each class had about twenty men in it, and there was a new class every half-hour. The first day was absolute bedlam – I had no idea how to keep order, and it was awful! Every time the PA system signalled mealtime or a class change, they would stampede out of the classroom and nearly mow me down. I was ready to quit, but I went back to the 'wrenery' and I had a stern talk with myself: "Vicki, you get back in that class tomorrow and take control, or you'll never be able to face anything again!"

When I went back the next morning, it was totally different. The same bedlam started, so I bellowed out "Silence!" They all stopped in shock.

There were two pillars in the classroom, so for moral support I leaned against one. I said to the sailors: "Now, I know that none of you want to take typing. Well, I don't want to be here as your teacher – I want to become a Visual Signaller. But you're going to learn typing, and I'm going to see that you learn. You don't think it's going to be very useful, but you never know when it will be."

"And I'm not going to tolerate anymore notes being passed around, anymore chewing gum or anymore comics. Captain O'Brien has said that if there are problems with any of you, you'll be going with me to see him." I had to force myself to say all this, and ended with a loud "Is that clear?"

"Yes, teacher," they all murmured sheepishly; and thankfully, they settled down.

I would say all this at the start of each new class, and it always worked. But if I now had order in the classroom, mealtimes were still a real ordeal. There were three thousand of us on that "ship," and at the signal for meals, the men would line up out of every doorway of the mess hall. I'd come along after class, all alone, and they'd start to tease and whistle. I had to control the blush creeping up my face as I walked on by them up to the front, as I'd been instructed to do. Then some would wail and complain: "That's not fair, she can eat before we can!"

I did have one other classroom incident, though: one chap sitting in the back row had something underneath the desk, on his lap. I noticed this, walked over and pulled out a comic book.

"I thought I told you there were to be no more comic books – start typing immediately!" I ordered.

He made some disparaging remark, but started typing. Then, sometime before the end of class, he got up and came forward.

"Teacher, I have some notes here I have to take to my Petty Officer. May I leave a few minutes early?" he asked brazenly.

All the typewriters had stopped, and everybody was watching to see how I would handle this. Thank God, I thought to look down at the papers he was holding – they were blank!

"There's nothing on these notes," I said. "What do you take me for? Do you think I'm a nincompoop? Get back to your seat, and keep typing till the end of class."

"What a hairpin," he said, disgruntled. But to my surprise, the whole class burst out clapping: "That's telling him, teacher!" I found out later that this guy was a slob; he wouldn't make his bunk, and was always trying to get out of things. So if I'd let him get away with that, I would have really have lost face in front of that class.

Finally, a new Visual Signalling course started at *St-Hyacinthe* and I was able to begin my training. I felt it was the greatest branch in the navy – that of the many occupations the wrens offered, there was no other branch for me. There was such a variety in Visual Signalling: we learned to read and send Morse code messages with lights, using a big shuttered lamp and the smaller Aldis lamp, and to read and send semaphore messages using special flags. We had to know the Fleet Signals Book by heart, and the different combinations of flags with all their various meanings. We needed perfect eyesight as well, to view these signals through a telescope and quickly and accurately translate what they meant. (We all had to have 20/20 vision, without glasses, to even get into Visual Signalling.)

We starting receiving signals from our instructor at the basic speed; then he would step it up the next week, and our eyes would just water from the strain! After we gradually adjusted to the new speed, the following week it would be stepped up again. It was gruelling, but we were very well trained. I found it quite fascinating – we all loved it.

In fact, because it was so colourful, our Visual Signallers branch was selected to publicize the WRCNS for recruitment purposes. A number of photos of our training were taken at the Signal School, most of them showing us up on the roof practising sending signals to wrens on other roofs. Copies of some of those photos later appeared in major newspapers across Canada.

Apart from our wonderful training, among the things I liked best at the Signal School were the daily route marches along the Yamaska River, every morning before breakfast. The large naval band led us, and we Wren Visual Signallers marched along right behind in our bell-bottom trousers and white sailor tops. It was healthy and invigorating, and we all came back eager for our breakfasts. And then there were the halves of honeydew melon, filled with vanilla ice cream, for which we lined up at the canteen on hot days. We only had to pay 10 cents for that delicious treat!

While we were at the Signal School, we were taken to Montréal several times to participate in parades. We were well trained for this, and the wrens proudly marched along in our smart uniforms, wearing white gloves, swinging our arms in perfect unison to the prescribed height. After I became a Leading Signaller, I was allowed to wear a gold star on my sleeve above the emblem of our branch, the gold crossed semaphore flags. Whenever I wasn't on parade, I would walk with my right arm out slightly in front, so people would be sure to see my gold star! That used to make them laugh.

When my training was over and I had passed all of my exams, I was posted to Halifax as a Visual Signaller. It was there that I came to know and respect the sailors of the merchant marine. At a certain point in the war, Britain had been bombed so badly that it had severe shortages, especially of meat, and was in dire need of relief. So our government appropriated merchant ships to transport food, armaments and troops. These ships became part of the merchant marine, and the sailors who manned them were called merchant seamen. While some of the ships may have been registered under foreign flags, the crews were mostly Canadian, sailing the route between Halifax and Britain.

In Halifax, on duty on the midnight-to-0800 signalling shift, I would see these convoys passing out of the harbour before dawn, often with as many as seventy ships – and with no lights on, so that the subs wouldn't see them. I would take their last messages on the signal lamp in Morse code and then say a prayer for their safe journey, as I knew that Nazi subs were lurking just outside the harbour. Most ships did make it across the Atlantic, thank God, but many were torpedoed. Some of these would limp back into harbour with big holes in their sides, but others would be sunk.

Because the merchant seamen were not part of the navy, they were treated differently – they didn't receive all the benefits navy veterans did. I feel that they often suffered more than many of the service people. Some were torpedoed two or three times! Their ships were the lifeblood of Britain and the Allied forces gathering on its soil. We all owed so much to these brave merchant seamen who crossed the ocean many times in dangerous waters. I really admired them, and have been concerned all these years that they haven't received the recognition and compensation they deserve. I hope they'll finally get it – there are only about 2,000 of them left now!

When I was stationed in Halifax we had an immense glass-covered wall map of the Halifax docks and those in Dartmouth, just across the bay. We would record the names of all the warships in our docks – the cruisers, corvettes and destroyers – as came in or left. We also received their messages and sent replies to them by semaphore or morse on the signal lamp. This was very exciting, and no one else was allowed up in our tower – our work was top secret.

The other girls used to say that you could always tell us V/S wrens in the "wrenery" dining room, because we'd lean forward while we ate so we could read the flashing Morse code signals going back and forth between the ships in the harbour and the shore. We kept the messages to ourselves, of course, but we so wanted to make sure that we didn't miss anything!

The most exciting event for me was when I happened to be on duty when an immense warship was coming in – the biggest warship ever to enter Halifax harbour. The rooftops were crowded with people eager to see the ship, and apparently their heads would turn from the ship's signaller to the wren – me – as I guided it in by semaphore, instructing it where to dock. I was very proud that day!

As it happened, one of my signalling instructors was on that warship and checking through the telescope to see if any of his former students were working on the signal towers. He recognized some of us wrens, and when he came ashore he invited us to come aboard his ship. He also got permission for us to tour one of the German submarines, which had been captured in the Atlantic and brought in. I sure didn't envy the men working on those submarines – the quarters were very cramped.

Life in Halifax wasn't always so pleasant, though. Another time I was on duty in early December. It was a terrible night, with hurricane-force winds and freezing rain. People were bent in two to fight their way through the storm; five ships broke their moorings and collided in the harbour; and our glassed-in tower was glazed over with ice. How could we read the signals through the glass? Nothing for it but to go outside. I was already wearing my bell-bottom trousers, and I put on my sheepskin-lined coat and fur-lined mitts – special gear our branch had been issued with because our work was so often outdoors.

I climbed up a ladder to the flat roof and strapped myself to the railing. My eyelashes quickly became covered with ice as I peered out through the freezing rain, and I kept having to remove it to read the flashing lights from the ships. I shouted the messages down a voice pipe to a wren below me in the iced-in tower, who wrote them down – though she kept having to ask me to repeat the messages, as the wind took away my words nearly as fast as I shouted them.

Towards the end of 1944, I was drafted from Halifax to Prince Rupert, British Columbia. The 3,000-mile train trip across the country took five days, and I didn't sleep a wink the whole way! Navy people who weren't officers were given third class quarters, so mine weren't exactly luxurious. There were all the "whistle stops," and the noise of the wheels – I think my berth must have been right above the wheels! Then I looked up and saw a mouse climbing along the curtain rod! I managed to plug the hole, but that finished me for trying to sleep. On the trip, messages would arrive for me from other navy people on the train (and air force and army types too) addressed to "The Wren Who Can't Sleep." I arrived in Prince Rupert like a zombie, and it took me days to recuperate.

Prince Rupert is far north, and close to Alaska – it was an embarkation point for the Aleutian Islands. (I used to write cards to family and friends: "From Canada's laaaast outpost.") There were 12,000 men there, and only 300 women of eligible age; so you can imagine that we were deluged with invitations! The social directors were desperate for us to attend the dances they put on; and when we did dance, there were usually rows of men five or six deep, all watching with envy. One sailor told me that I was the first woman he'd spoken to in over a year!

But they all behaved like gentlemen, and we wrens also acted properly. I never heard a wren swear, or saw any act in an undignified way, and we always wore our hats and gloves when we went out. The officers had told us in basic training that although we were called into service to take over many of the jobs the sailors did, so they could be released for sea duty, they wanted us to remember that we were ladies – and we would be treated as such. (The CWACs, on the other hand, were told that they would be taking over a man's job, and would be treated like men. They had to roll up their mattresses in their dormitories, and weren't even given mirrors!)

At Prince Rupert, I sent and received a lot of coded messages to and from the various outposts up and down the pacific coast. I also responded to a request for a volunteer wren to teach semaphore to the Boy Scouts. Every week, I enjoyed teaching between thirty and forty young boys from the stage in a gym, the letters of the alphabet and putting letters and words together using the semaphore flags.

After V-E Day many of us were discharged, though we were allowed to wear our uniforms for one more month. Another wren and I took a cruise up to Alaska through the Inland Passage. But at the end of the trip, I wasn't entitled to wear my wren uniform any more. As I took off each item, tears filled my eyes. I loved my uniform, and had been so proud to wear it. The gold star and other insignia are somewhat tarnished now; but I still wear my jacket, my round rig hat and my medals in parades, or when addressing students with other veterans on other special occasions. I was so proud of every wren I knew. I had loved my work as a Visual Signaller, and never wanted to come off duty. When I was off duty, I could hardly wait to go back on!

Back on civvy street I thought to myself, "What am I going to do now?" I couldn't bear the thought of going back into an office. I didn't really want to go back to teaching either, although I did feel a great sense of accomplishment when those boys mastered their simple typing! But after the marvellous outdoor life of the navy signaller, teaching or being tied to a desk just couldn't compete.

So I thought, what's the next best thing for women? Well, a variety of veterans' benefits were available in those days after the war, and education was one of them. Then I thought of agriculture – it's outdoors! There was a wonderful program at MacDonald College in Ste-Anne-de-Bellevue, Quebec, so I signed up for it – and became one of only two girls in a class of thirty-six boys. Unlike the degree program, which was more scientific, the seventeen subjects in our diploma course were very practical.

Before the first year started, I worked on an apple farm. Then between the first and second year I found employment on a dairy farm on Prince Edward Island, which had a beautiful herd of pure-bred Jersey cattle, a hundred turkey poults, an apple orchard and vegetable crops. There I gained the experience I needed to complete my thesis. After I graduated I began working on a magazine for Jersey cattle breeders, as associate editor and business manager. My work included attending agricultural fairs, judging cattle, writing articles about the results and illustrating them with photographs of the champions. I even went to Jersey Island to cover a conference, and met Jersey breeders from around the world.

My war experiences often came in handy in later life. For instance, shortly after the war I went to the south of France with two former wrens, and we spent ten days on the Mediterranean. I journeyed on the *SS Ascania,* a former troop ship. One evening I was on deck and another ship went by and began signalling us in Morse. My eyes were still so well trained that I began to read the message out loud – because the people around me were asking, "What's it saying?" (Other ships usually just want to know what kind of ship you are, where you're from and what your name is.)

Then a voice from the bridge said, "Would the person down there who is reading that signal please come up here right away?"

"Oh, my, perhaps I shouldn't have read that out loud," I thought.

So I went up there with my heart pounding; and the captain said: "This young man here can't read those signals – would you please tell us what the other ship is flashing?"

I was so relieved, and gladly did so! Apparently I was the only one on that ship who could read the signals: unless you were a trained signaller, you wouldn't have been able to, they go so quickly. And most of those on board weren't even service people; most were war brides.

Anybody in the services during the war will tell you that we made lifelong friends. We were so close in our work, our experiences, our training, everything. We were together so much in so many different circumstances. And we managed to have a lot of fun together – I was well known in the navy for my hearty laugh! (One day, I went to the theatre in Victoria, British Columbia, to see a comedy, and of course I laughed. When I came out afterwards, to my surprise there were several wrens waiting for me. "We knew you were in there, Wickham, we heard you laughing!" they said.)

I still correspond with several former wrens. Several years ago I went over to Britain and stayed with a former wren who had been with me in Halifax. During the bombing of Britain, when she was sixteen years old, her parents sent her to Canada to get away from the bombs. But when she turned eighteen, she joined the Canadian wrens and became a Visual Signaller. Then she went back to England after the war, and we've written to each other ever since.

One of the most heart-warming experiences I had was the day in 1995 when I was part of a large group of veterans in Ottawa for ceremonies to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the war's end. We were taken in open transports from Parliament Hill to Lansdowne Park, all wearing our medals. The streets were lined with citizens, several rows deep, all clapping and cheering as we went by. Many of them called out, "Thank you, thank you!" Many of us had tears in our eyes, that such gratitude should still be shown us even after so many years.

A recent high point for me was at the luncheon to celebrate World War II Women veterans, which was held on October 26, 1999. I heard some say that I was lucky to have been in such an exciting branch of the navy. Someone gave a toast: "To the wrens, God bless them." Here ends my tale.

Céline Vigneault –
née Lessard

I was born in 1932, the only child of Jean-Marie and Irma Lessard, in Victoriaville, Quebec. My father worked for a Shawinigan company, installing electricity in the houses and barns of the local farming community. But when war was declared in 1939, my father lost his employment. In that era, all industries were to contribute to the war effort.

My mother was a nurse; but because she was married, she was not allowed to work in a hospital. So in order to support the family, my mother accepted a nursing job in the colony of St. Elizabeth de Proulx – a small hamlet north of Lac St. Jean with a population of approximately two hundred people, all of whom were employed in the lumber industry. My parents sold almost everything they had in order to move north. Our quarters there were furnished, but it was a far cry from the nice furnishings we had in Victoriaville.

The village, if you can call it that, had no electricity, no indoor plumbing and no paved roads. In fact, the road was more of a lumber track, full of holes and extremely rough. Horse and buggy did most transportation, even that late in this century. It was quite isolated, and most buildings were log cabins. I remember seeing all sorts of wild animals, even a moose, in the backyard. My father took care of the house, heated the stove and did the cooking, and my mother worked outside the home. That was unusual for those days.

A priest and a few nuns of the Congrégation du Bon Conseil looked after both the religious and school education of the community. We had one small school divided into two sections: grades one to six, and then the older grades.

My mother, being the only nurse in the village, also acted as midwife and helped the local doctor to deliver almost all the babies. She would often be picked up at night by a horse-drawn wagon (normally used to take the cut trees out of the forest) to help deliver a baby. The winters are long and hard in the northern part of Quebec, so she bought a man's heavy bearskin coat. It had a high collar that she could pull up to protect her neck and face from the freezing wind and snow. It was also quite long, and my mother was not too tall, so the coat reached her ankles.

One winter night when she was called out, she decided to keep warm by wearing a pair of ski trousers under the fur coat. Well, that was certainly quite the scandal! The local priest was told about her daring feat; and lo and behold, did he not preach at her about it the following Sunday in church, in front of all the parishioners!

My mother was furious. Being the strong-willed and dedicated person that she was, she decided not to take this criticism. She marched down to the bishop and told him what had happened. She explained that her duty was to help the sick, and that she would be of no use to the community if she herself were to get ill – so it was not logical for her to go out in the cold wearing a skirt and nylons.

The bishop agreed. He picked up the telephone (there were only two telephones in the village, one at the presbytery and one at our house), called the store in the next community, and told them that he was sending M^{me} Lessard down. She was to buy herself a pair of trousers and a long skirt to wear over them, and the bill was to be sent to him. He told the local priest that he had given my mother permission to wear pants during her night outings only, as long as they were worn under her skirt. The clergy had a great deal of power and influence over their parishioners in those days.

One day in 1942 or thereabouts, a jeep pulled up at the presbytery, which was built on the highest spot in town. Everyone was curious to see what was going on. A military man in an air force uniform (his name was M. Tardif) walked up the house. He asked the priest, Father

Adolphe Tremblay, if he and his housekeeper would be part of the Service du Guerre aérien – the Aviation Detective Corps. This service not only helped identify and report foreign or enemy planes, but also helped to find Allied aircraft that were lost or in trouble.

My parents were also asked if they would help. Of course, being ten years old and curious, I said I wanted to be in the watch too! Since I had the only bicycle in town, the military gentleman said that I could. We were given posters with pictures and silhouettes of various aircraft, and instructed how to report any sightings. If possible, we had to identify the airplane, write down its tail number if we could, note its flight path or whether it was circling as if in distress, and then call Bagotville Air Force Base to report it. We were given a password to give the telephone operator: ours was "Turcot 681."

However, the priest's housekeeper, M^{me} Loiselle, would always jump on the telephone line first, because she did not take the time to write everything down on her sheet properly. She would just jump on the line and tell her code, and then the operator would cut off all other callers. I only ever managed to beat her to the phone once. But there were not very many aircraft flying overhead, since Ste. Elizabeth de Proulx was so far north.

(The Detective Corps also operated in other places in Quebec. I learned later that my future father-in-law, M. Vigneault, who lived in Natascouane, was also part of the watch. They used the telegraph service to report the sightings of aircraft, and also submarines seen in the St. Lawrence.)

The Service de Guerre aérien operated until 1944, when the watch corps was dismantled as the menace of the Germans was disappearing. Our silver badges were inscribed with the words "Watch and Warn." My dear father was so proud of having performed this service for Canada that he kept his identification card and badge in his wallet until he died, in his eighties. We all received a certificate of gratitude from the Department of National Defence. I was very pleased to have been able to do a bit for my country, even as a young civilian girl.

Cathryne 'Kay' Armstrong –
née Blackley

When war was declared in 1939 I had just graduated from high school in Huntsville, Ontario. I was about to attend the Teresa School of Design in Toronto, and I was on a waiting list for a university in Wales. But I changed my plans and decided I should be involved in the war effort.

I applied to the Canadian Women's Army Corps, the air force and the navy. You had to have three character references from local community leaders, along with "the good will of your parents." Although the air force and navy called me first, I decided to "Go army." My father was from a military family: he had served with the army in South Africa in the First World War, and was granted the Military Medal. After the war he taught gunnery and riding at RMC Kingston until he retired.

In June 1942 I started my basic training at the Armouries on University Avenue in Toronto. We were quartered at the old barracks on George Street, and our uniforms included armbands that proclaimed to the world that we were recruits. Our daily ritual consisted of marching from the barracks down to the Armouries; back for lunch; and then back down University Avenue again. My first accomplishment was learning to keep in step with the woman beside me; and I have many memories of the blistered heels we had to care for!

Adjusting to a military lifestyle wasn't difficult for me: I was used to it at home. Some things didn't come as a surprise, such as the need for good order and discipline. Others were an adventure, such as our curiosity as to what the future held in terms of postings and assignments. I liked barracks life, there was always something stimulating and interesting happening. But being in the military was lonely for those who had never even been away to camp before, or associated with other women. Quite a few recruits were the only child in their families, and many were homesick. Because I was from the area, there was always someplace to go or someone to visit; but it was harder for those who were from the western part of Canada or the Maritimes, a great distance away from home and their friends.

I found that if you liked people, and took courses in the areas that interested you, it wasn't all that difficult. Perhaps going without makeup and wearing the same dress every day was very hard on some of the girls? Sometimes the girls had difficulties sharing boyfriends too – we were always moving on to somebody else!

I had always been interested in art and had studied painting in school, because I had hoped to go into architecture. Then somebody suggested that I do some artwork on the barren walls of our barracks. Wayne Martin, a Toronto art teacher, saw my work and told me about a big art exhibit coming up, in which they wanted to include some talent from the armed forces. He said that my work was good enough and I should enter. So I did – with the result that one of my paintings, *Decontamination Squad,* was shown across Canada and wound up in the National Gallery in Ottawa.

After basic training, while I was waiting for my posting, the authorities interviewed me and decided that I had an empathy with people. They felt I should be on the recruitment team, so I was told to pack my bags and take the train to Hamilton. I wound up recruiting in Brantford and Niagara Falls for about a year and a half. That was quite an experience, taking command of a small unit of recruiting personnel like that!

I was prepared for my work by a RCMP officer, who taught me some methods of interviewing and the secret of how to establish common ground. He said: "When the potential recruit comes in, the first thing you do is comment on something she's wearing. Tell her it looks nice and you want to know where she got it." That way, you completely disarm them.

Our recruiting office in Hamilton was at 2 King St. West, upstairs from a drugstore – the regular army was on one side, and the women's division on the other. There was a ton of paperwork – you always had all these papers in front of you. (Everything was done in triplicate everywhere in the armed forces. You had to have that third piece of paper! If you didn't, we used to say, "Bay Street is after you." Bay Street, in Toronto, was where recruiting HQ was located then.)

The criteria for enlisting were quite strict. You could apply anywhere in the country, but you had to be at least eighteen. (At first the minimum age was twenty-one, but it was lowered in 1943.) You had to fill in an extensive questionnaire. You had to have references, and the references were checked. And you had to be in really good health. Before being accepted, you were taken to hospital and given a very thorough medical check-up for contagious diseases, or to see if your system was prone to illness. If so, then you were rejected.

I had quite a few interesting interviews: some girls would come up from the United States to try and join the Canadian army. Nine times out of ten, they were trying to avoid problems at home or some sort of theft charge.

But one of the most memorable interviews concerns a young lady who came bouncing up the stairs into the recruiting office one day. I began to interview her and fill out the questionnaire, but she was quite aggressive and I didn't take to her that well. I found her very demanding. When we got to her age, it turned that she was only seventeen.

I said, "I'm sorry, I can't do anything for you," and she stood up and stamped her feet.

"Your only alternative is for your father or mother to come in and attest that they realize what you're doing, and that they give their support," I said.

She said, "I'll be back tomorrow – and I will get in!"

The next day she came back with this older, white-haired gentleman and said, "This is my father, and he agrees to me going into the service."

I asked him if this was all right with him, and he said: "If this is what she wants, then let her go in."

Well, as it happened, I knew of this gentleman: he was a judge, and there was a rumour in the Niagara peninsula that he had many contacts – who were not all favoured by many people. I was concerned, and I thought, "What do I do now? Here I've got this volunteer standing in front of me demanding her rights."

So I fixed his signature to her papers and said that I would be in touch. As soon as they left, I phoned Bay Street and said, "I've got a problem here. I've got this girl..."

But when I told them who her father was, they just said to send her on down. Her name was Judy LaMarsh, and she was the first woman cabinet minister after the war. She was just as aggressive in her political life as she was in her private life. I guess it worked out for her.

Another recruiting incident never sat right with me. One day a Japanese girl, born in Canada, came in to join up. She was a primary-school teacher in British Columbia, but she and her family had come to Hamilton because they were moving the Japanese away from the West Coast at that time. She was a delightful person, soft-spoken and very feminine, and would have made an ideal worker in many positions in the army. I was sure that she could do quite well, and wrote a personal note on the interview form saying: "This girl is Canadian, born in Canada, and she deserves recognition for what she is trying to do."

But when the application came back, they had turned her down. So I appealed it. I said I couldn't understand this: The girl was a primary school teacher, good enough to teach children, she was born in Canada – she ought to be good enough to put on the uniform!

Could they not place her in a position that wasn't related to security, yet would still recognize her Canadian citizenship?

They never did let her join, though, and I often wondered what happened to her. She was turned down by her fellow Canadians out of fear. That was one of the things I didn't like about the army – this was a case where they could have righted a real wrong. There was so much of that in the war.

In general, the types of girls who came to join up depended on their background. There was a strong military connection from the eastern provinces, but many from the West didn't have that connection – they were mainly of Ukrainian or Polish backgrounds, and from farming communities. I found that people were more oriented toward serving the empire in central Canada. The main reason I joined up was that in our family, my brother was younger than I was and no one else was old enough to serve the Empire. That term was used quite widely: it was felt that you had an obligation, a responsibility.

After I had been in recruiting for about two years, in the Hamilton and Barrie areas, I was offered the opportunity to either take my commission or go overseas. I was a corporal then, but chose to give up my stripes to go in the draft. (At that time, when CWAC women were attached to a regiment to do a job, they would just assume the rank that was vacant on the establishment.

So in early June 1944 I was sent to Gourock, Scotland, and from there to Greenock, to Glasgow, and then down to London by train – on D-Day, as it happened. We were allocated to Ealing, in London, to help with at the Postal Tracing Section, which dealt with any mail addressed to service personnel that got lost or damaged. It was primarily men, who did the job then, and they didn't take to a group of girls coming in – we were too fast and too smart!

I remember one officer I met who had his feet up on the desk and a girl-of-the-month picture on the billboard behind him. I said, "The first thing you do is take your feet off the desk and take those pictures down off the wall. This is not what you are here for."

He was furious, and said "I can have you court marshalled!"

"Why don't you do that," I said. "Because then I will have a press conference, to indicate that you are not worthy of wearing that uniform overseas."

Well, he was fit to be tied; but later he laughed about it. That sort of broke the ice.

One of the dangers of being in Ealing was that we were constantly being buzz-bombed. We were always having to run to the base and hide against the walls.

After we'd been there for a while, we were posted to the newly opened Canadian Tobacco Depot in Burnham Beach, out near Windsor. This was Colonel J.L. Ralston's idea – he was the Canadian Minister of National Defence at the time, and wanted a better system for distributing tobacco to the men overseas. Instead of being sent overseas in packages for individual servicemen, tobacco would be diverted to Ottawa and then come over in big postal bags to the tobacco depot in England. The packages were sorted at the depot, then dispatched to the regiments where the men were serving – in England, or overseas in Belgium or France. The reorganization improved the flow of tobacco products to the men overseas.

When we got to Burnham Beach, we spent the first three days on our knees scrubbing the floors of the old British army hut we were to use – they were filthy. I had taught myself to type, so I passed the trades' test and became part of the administration staff at No. 2 Tobacco Depot. I was one of three people in the Orderly Room, doing the paperwork for the arrival and distribution of the tobacco. However, I was rather bored at times because I was doing the same thing day after day. It was too methodical. I wanted to meet new people and do new things. And I wanted to go farther, and make it all the way to the continent – my father had served there, and I felt that since I'd made it this far I should keep going.

So I applied for overseas duty in Belgium, and was among the ones selected to go. We crossed the English Channel in the middle of the night, on a ship that was also carrying of a group of padres and officers returning to their regiment on the continent. (One of the officers, Captain Bean, was the brother of a doctor I had known in Toronto. He would be killed in action a few days later.) Our captain was very concerned about the responsibility of ferrying three Canadian girls across at night: he gave up his cabin to us, and even posted a guard outside the door.

When we arrived in Ostend we were taken to a safe house while we waited for transport to Antwerp. During our stay there, we met a girl from the ATS (the Army Territorial Service, the British counterpart of CWAC) who had the shakes. She had been at an ack-ack site – the long-barrelled guns they used to shoot German aircraft down – and had been caught in a trap between the German and British aircraft. There had been actual ammunition going over her head. Eventually the poor ATS girl was pulled out and brought to the safe house, but she was shell-shocked. We had to literally hold her down for a whole day, until they could get her back to London.

From there, I went to the army base at Second Echelon, which was responsible for personnel and administration. Driving to Brussels, I said to the driver: "I really like all these pretty pink and blue houses. Look at all those people in the doorways, waving at us. Gee, they're friendly. Wouldn't it be nice if Canada were like this?"

He howled with laughter, but said nothing. When I arrived at the base, the story made the rounds and everyone was saying, "Go look at the naïve Canadian." Those pretty houses were houses of prostitution, which were legal in Europe!

I worked in Card Index at Second Echelon. I never had problems fitting in once I arrived at a new post, and got along just fine with the group of girls there. It seemed that every group had a friendship within their own unit that lasted throughout the whole war. No matter where you were, your loyalty was with your friends around you – not with the bigger scene. We had a sort of dual patriotism. I guess this was like building family relationships.

While we were there, the German army broke through the Hockwal Forest and attacked the Allies. We recent arrivals were sequestered in a schoolroom and lived on cold rations until the Germans were rounded up. (Those of us who had any Christmas rations left made short work of them, so they wouldn't be available for possible German consumption.)

Eventually I was posted to First Army Post Office and Postal Tracing Section in Antwerp, where I joined other CWAC members who were billeted in a house formerly occupied by collaborators. Our stay in Antwerp was shortened by a German buzz bomb of the silent type. It demolished some units working near the harbour. We lost part of our mess, and found ourselves digging out from under piles of glass and debris. I owe my life to one Sgt. Cooper: he was seated at a small table writing to his wife when he grabbed me and threw me to the floor – thereby saving me from flying glass. He contends that he acted on impulse, because we had no warning of the impending attack.

Within days we were evacuated as a unit to Aalst, near Brussels in Belgium. Once we were settled in there, I took some leave and went to Paris, which was considered a leave centre in 1944. I was able to attend the École des Beaux-Arts for a while.

I also had the opportunity to be invited to tea with Madame Vanier, whose husband was then the Canadian Ambassador to France. Another guest they were going to have that day was General De Gaulle – they thought it was quite a coup to have him for tea!

The guests were all reminded to be their best behaviour, because this was the General's first visit back to France. We thought, "Well, it's just another man." We were sitting in front of the fireplace having tea when the General was introduced to us. He was a very large man, about six feet three – he was wearing his full dress uniform, and with his hat on he looked more like six feet seven. He had very deep-set, piercing blue eyes as well. Madame Vanier asked him to sit down, and he said he would stand. She had the aide pour him some tea – he took a sip of it, put his cup down, turned on his heel and left. He was not what I would call a social animal, at least not that day.

(Years later, in 1975 – which was International Women's Year – I was in Paris at a conference for the International Council of Women. We were invited to the palace to be entertained, and our hostess was De Gaulle's daughter. She was also some six feet three! I just said, "You remind me very much of your father," and left it at that.)

I went back to my unit in March 1945, and that was where I met my future husband. He had just been posted over from England, and I can still remember him coming in with all his pots and pans on his back. (In those days, you had to carry all your kit with you on a new posting, including cooking and eating utensils – you never knew when battle orders might change, and you would need some or all of your kit.) He had very wide shoulders. I thought, "Oh God, not another 'Louis.'" We women called all the brash young lieutenants "Louis" – it was quite common for them to single out the Canadian girls. We had the pick of the lot!

Of course, we women would always confer with each other if we met a new friend. We'd ask, is he married, or engaged? Does he have a family? We'd pass the information along from one to another, as a protective measure. In those days there was always the feeling, "Tomorrow I could be dead." And sometimes it did happen.

I remember one incident that not many people know about and I often wonder why. During the last stage of the war, when the push was on to conquer Germany, the Canadian forces in Italy were dispatched in three directions: some through the northern part of France, the others overland through Belgium and Holland. This three-way movement of troops was called the "Gold Flakes Scheme." Any mail, parcels or communications for any of these troops came through the base post office in Lot, France, and through the postal tracing division. They were simply marked Gold Flakes Scheme, and they were held until the troops arrived in Belgium.

Everyone was sworn in secrecy about this operation. We worked twenty hours a day, stockpiling things and sorting out addresses. We were also CB (confined to barracks), not allowed to go into town or associate with anyone outside our immediate area. Before leaving our posts we had to make sure nothing was left with a Belgian employee – we were never sure if they had sided with the Germans.

In Belgium, there wasn't much to do at night unless you wanted to haunt the pubs – and that wasn't a particularly good idea, unless you had an escort, because you never knew who was going to be beside you. There were still a lot of cleanup operations going on, picking up people who had sided with the Germans.

So some of us started a little canteen, serving coffee or chocolate, for anyone who wanted something other than the alcohol scene. At that time, we were losing a lot of people to poisoned alcohol – if they bought it off the general market, it could be the stuff they put in cars. People were being blinded. We called our canteen "The Greasy Spoon," and it was a place where you dropped your rank at the door. Officers could be seen washing dishes or serving coffee. Everyone mingled, and it was a good way of keeping friendships alive.

At first we had only coffee and cookies that we scrounged from the men. Later we had sandwiches as well, and eventually it got so that we were selling more pickled eggs than the pub in town! We kept spare books and magazines there, and there was always something of interest for everyone. People would all gravitate there in the evenings. We were quite a success.

At that time, I also enrolled in some after-hours classes. I studied French, German, and teaching art. One night in French class, our teacher Bertha Patigmay came in and started to cry. She said, "Have you heard the news? Roosevelt is dead." The class was cancelled for the night. One of the chaps, James Mitchell, cried like a baby. Everyone loved Roosevelt. I can still remember the news coverage of his life, and what Mrs. Roosevelt was able to accomplish during his time in office.

I had a friend in Belgium named Betty Devonish. She was originally from Oxford, England, though her family had lived in Canada. She had joined the ATS and then transferred over to CWAC, its Canadian equivalent. We became very good friends, and bunked side by side throughout the war. At one point in Antwerp, we had taken over a house that had belonged to a Belgian collaborator. Betty and I would both be in the Orderly Room, doing paperwork, even though the war was still going on some thirty miles away. We arranged our coffee breaks around the daily German raids: they would arrive every morning at 10 a.m. and every afternoon at 3 p.m. Betty used to say, "Those bloody Germans are so predictable!" So when the Germans came to do their bombing, we would sit down and have our coffee; then we'd get back to our work.

I was in Belgium when the war in Europe ended. On May 6, Betty and I were stationed in this old building, a furniture factory named Grand Menuiseries. We were sitting on a little bridge that joined two buildings. It was early in the morning, and I looked at Betty and said, "Betty, listen – you can hear birds!"

She said, "My God, you're right!"

Something was happening; you could just feel it. That was the day they first met to sign the agreement, and the first day we heard no bombings. The next day, May 7, one of our drivers came rushing into the barracks, shouting: "La guerre est fini!"

Everybody was on pins and needles, waiting in suspense, and on May 8 it was officially announced. We went into Brussels to celebrate, and you could see the Coca-Cola signs all lit up. We just walked up and down the street, looking at the lights. All of a sudden, bands came out from nowhere and started playing. That was a very emotional night. I remember everybody just milling around, they didn't quite know what to do. It was just amazing – all of a sudden, the war was over.

All I could think of the next day was getting home, but that took a while. In September 1945, I married Gordon Armstrong. He was well liked wherever he went, so I thought, why not? (It turned out that we had just missed one another in England: he had worked in the Manchester postal depot, so I knew him on paper. And he had been posted to Ealing, the same depot I was in, though after I had left.) Almost the same day that we were married, they closed down the postal units; and a week later, they decided to pull our unit back to England.

We began the task of disassembling the unit. First and Second Echelon were gradually disbanded, to get people back to Canada. The withdrawal was decided via a point system, based on how long we'd been serving overseas. At the same time, the occupation force for Germany was being outfitted. A new group of CWACs came over from Canada and went directly to Germany.

Back in London in October, I managed to step off a curb and break my ankle; so I had to come home on the hospital ship *Lady Nelson.* Gordon came home in January on the *Scythia,* after being overseas for seven years. I had only been away for two years, and was demobbed in February.

I never thought about staying in. I wanted to get a home and start a family. I was tired of war – most of us were. It was a release of emotion. We all felt, "okay, we've done our duty – now let's take a look at our own personal aspirations." During the war you were required to work in order to release the men for service overseas, so you didn't think of what you wanted to do, or where you wanted to go.

Really, the Second World War was the beginning of the women's liberation movement. The women who went to war were pioneers because all of a sudden they became aware of their own potential. The reality of the situation was that you were doing a job equal to that of a man going off to war. If you hadn't been there, who would you've had to rely on? Women had to undertake many different tasks because of the lack of men around to do them – tasks they would never have tried otherwise. This gave them a sense of achievement and equality.

I found there were large differences between men and women in terms of their leadership styles. Men tended to be very brisk and aggressive in their decisions, without necessarily looking at both sides of the coin. Women would look over all the possibilities of a situation before picking a solution. Which was better depended on the question: If it were a decision about battle arrangements, then the men would probably make a better decision – simply because of their background and training. Women were not trained to make battle decisions, they were trained to make decisions about administration and groups of people. (And of course there were a few women who would throw their rank around, just to reassure themselves they had it.)

There was never a dull moment to my army experiences. I think they gave me a better awareness of people, and taught me to go and find things out for myself. The military offers a stepping stone for women – some women can learn in six months to do things that may take other women years to learn. Women are very capable of learning and accomplishing the tasks put before them; and we have great survival instincts too.

For instance, years after the war, I was in Vienna with the International Council of Women. A friend and I had just come back from luncheon and we were walking along the street. I had this uneasy feeling and said "Dorothy, something's wrong."

"What do you mean?" she said.

"I can feel something's wrong, it's too quiet," I said.

"Well, I guess everyone's just gone for lunch," she said.

"No, there's not enough movement – something's wrong," I said.

We kept walking, and I was keeping a nervous eye open around me. Then Dorothy asked me why I was hugging the side of the street. I didn't even realize I was doing it! "It's just second nature," I said. In Europe, if you were out alone in a town around nightfall, you always stayed close to the sides of the buildings so that there was no shadow to give you away to anyone watching. You were constantly aware of what was around you and who was beside you. No matter what service you were in, those things stay with you – even in peacetime Vienna, twenty ears later!

As we walked along, I noticed some soldiers – but they didn't look like Austrian soldiers: they were wearing brown boots. Later, when we got back to the hotel, we discovered that they were Russian soldiers – to protect the Russian premier Kruschev, who was in town for trade talks. That was just one of the strange ways your wartime experiences stay with you.

I think joining the army also had a lot to do with patriotism, especially for women. Of course men were patriotic too; but remember that we had just come out of a Depression, and many men joined the services simply because they didn't have a job. We wanted to feel that we were doing something for the war effort to lessen the hate and the role of people like Hitler. We had an objective that we could literally see; in peacetime you don't have that.

Goldie Smith – née Lloyd

When the war started, I was living at home with my parents in the small village of Hillier, Ontario, and in my fourth year of high school in Wellington. That Sunday morning, we didn't turn on the radio; so we didn't know that the war had begun until my sister and brother-in-law arrived for lunch.

I was very patriotic and wanted to do my share. When it was announced that women were beginning to be accepted into the services, I wrote to ask about the education requirements and the types of work available to women. My parents were probably not thrilled about my joining the services, but they accepted my decision and were proud of me.

I enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force, Women's Division (WD), in Toronto in late October of 1942, and was sent to Rockcliffe for four weeks of training. Then I was posted to Eastern Air Command in Halifax, Nova Scotia, to work in the War Room. After three weeks there, three of us were sent on to Dartmouth Air Station to work in the Bomber Operations Room. We were the first WDs in Bomber Ops there, but we were made to feel very welcome.

We had to learn our work very quickly, as the boys we were replacing were posted out within days. I still remember the noise of the dozen phones that rang frequently, often several at a time. We had no Call Waiting or answering machines then! We worked in shifts, so that there was always one girl per shift. When our shifts ended at midnight, there was a long walk home; but we always had a friendly escort from one of the sections. The airmen on the base were very protective of us – they were like brothers, although there *were* a few dates!

I found our work very interesting. We made up the orders for the crews going on anti-sub patrols and covering convoys. Every day we received the information from the navy detailing the time they would be arriving in or leaving Halifax. The Plotting Officer drew up the area to be covered, and we typed the orders and made up the kits for them: cypher books, cameras, binoculars and all the other information they needed. These all had to be signed for by the captain and navigator of the crew. Later we would check to ensure that everything had been returned.

For the first six months, we also did the work of Flying Control – dealing with local flying that wasn't under the auspices of bomber operations. We recorded all the messages that arrived in our office over the teletype.

I quickly found out that things didn't always go smoothly. Within the first two months, we lost four patrol aircraft in one stormy evening. Two were able to land at Charlottetown airport; but the others were too far away to get back when the weather closed in on them. One crashed about six miles from its home base of Dartmouth, and all four crew members were killed. But the crew of the other plane – two pilots, the navigator and a wireless operator – managed to bail out, having unloaded their depth charges to lighten the load.

They thought they were over land; but they were still a mile out from Charlottetown and landed on various ice floes in the Northumberland Strait, scattered in the darkness. When daylight came, they managed to get onto the same patch of ice. They burned their parachutes for a fire, though the flimsy nylon material lasted only a few minutes, and ate chocolate bars for their only rations.

The four men were out there for *five days* before they were spotted by a search plane – nothing could be sent up earlier because of the bad weather. Then an icebreaker went out and rescued them. They had all suffered horribly from exposure and frostbite – one was later discharged with damaged feet. But the first thing one of them asked was about the outcome of the air force/navy hockey game!

Our living arrangements on the Dartmouth base were a bit makeshift. Because there were only a few women there – most of whom were hospital assistants and lived at the hospital – there wasn't really room for us. So we shared a house on the station with a few female officers. As more girls came to live at the house, we partitioned it off for living space. Those of us who lived in the kitchen used the pantry for our possessions, and the girls in the dining room used a china cabinet.

Fortunately there were two bathrooms, so we didn't have to share with the officers. Because our hot water heater was rusted, we carried our washing water by pail from the fire hall next door. We washed our clothes in the kitchen sink and hung them to dry in the pantry. (This room had a huge window, so the view from the road must have been most interesting!)

We stayed in this house until the women's barracks were completed in June 1943. Later, when the barracks filled up, some of us moved to the Seaplane base and lived in half of one of the male sergeants' barracks. (They partitioned off the washrooms; but once in a while we would hear an indignant: "A man is in our side!")

Meals were another matter. There was no WD canteen, so at first we ate at the hospital. When more girls arrived, we ate with them at the Seaplane Mess. Finally, a snack bar was opened in the Recreation Hall. That became our meeting and social spot. There were lots of activities available there: dances, movies, ping-pong games, a music room and a YMCA office.

In September 1943, I was made a corporal. Every person's job was necessary on the station, from the Commanding Officer down to the cleaners. We couldn't function effectively without everybody pulling their weight. I'm sure some of the jobs weren't very interesting, but they were needed.

We were allowed to just walk off base at Dartmouth – unlike other bases, where one had to show ID to leave and enter. At times, though, we servicewomen were not treated very well in stores. We made a joke of it then, but it did wound our feelings. There is one ladies' wear store that I still avoid because of how I was treated in one of its Halifax stores. Certain restaurants or dance halls were off-limits, but others were acceptable. I recall the Palm Gardens in Dartmouth as being especially good to us.

In May 1944 I was posted to Sydney, where the station was much smaller and farther away from the town. The main event of my posting there was my marriage to Brian Smith, a Wireless Air Gunner with Squadron 161. We had met earlier in Dartmouth, and then he too was posted to Sydney with part of his squadron. We were married in St. Andrew's United Church on January 27, 1945, and lived in Sydney until he was posted to Pat Bay in British Columbia.

I returned to the station after Brian left, and was at work there when the war ended. We were very anxious to see an enemy sub, and hoped for one to be escorted into Sydney Harbour – in vain. With no more anti-sub and convoy patrols, our work became rather boring. I spent some leave in Ontario before travelling to Vancouver to rejoin my husband, and finally received my discharge in July at Jericho Beach.

It took me quite some time to adjust to civilian life: I found that I didn't have much interest in clothes, jewellery and small talk. However, the civilian wives told me that I could relate to the men in a way they couldn't.

Women contributed in many ways during the war, when new occupations opened up to women. Many worked in munitions and other types of factory work. I enjoyed my time in the air force, and feel that it was a positive learning experience – I hope that girls serving with the forces now feel the same. There were all types of people from all over Canada, and we became much more aware of our country and all its peoples. My best memories of service life, next to the wonderful people I met, are of the interesting work I did – it was fun to go to work each day. (Though I did feel a little guilty about enjoying myself so much, when others were suffering and dying.)

I have attended several reunions, and enjoyed them all. Each of us has kept in touch with some of the others, so if you had lost touch with a friend, someone else hadn't, and you could catch up on their lives. I'm looking forward to the next reunion in Edmonton in 2001.

Eleanor Ann Carroll –
née Grattan

When the war started I was in high school at Tabusintac, New Brunswick. I left school and went to Fredericton with my sister, Marguerite, to do housework[1] at the University of New Brunswick. (I'd never travelled alone before that, so I certainly wasn't what you would call well-travelled!) Fredericton was an army city, and while I worked there I saw a lot of girls in the Canadian Women's Army Corps (CWAC). I always admired their uniforms – they looked so nice when they were out in public.

So on one of my days off, I walked downtown to Major Barker's house – his wife had all the information on CWAC, and his daughter was a recruiting officer. They had posters in the windows of their house. I stopped in to inquire about CWAC, and by the time I left I had filled out the forms and joined! I wasn't so much convinced by the major's daughter, but I was very impressed by the uniforms. And my brother Everett was in the army then, serving overseas with the Royal Canadian Corps of Signals (RCCS).

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[1] Home economics.

I thought that enlisting would be a good experience, so I joined on the spur of the moment, on June 16, 1943. I didn't stop to consult with anyone, so I managed to surprise everyone! I was very excited about enlisting. My family was pleased, though, and supportive of my choice.

I wasn't married at that time, but I had a friend overseas who I corresponded with. His name was Harry and we had met at a dance in my hometown. He had joined the 7th Anti-Tank Regiment in 1939, and had been overseas since then. He didn't mind my being in the army one bit: he was quite proud of me.

The army posted me to Saint John, New Brunswick, where we were processed through all the recruiting channels and sent on to Kitchener, Ontario for basic training. The training was hard – or at least we thought it was. But we had good times too. When we were given a pass to go into downtown Kitchener, we were very excited and proud of our uniforms.

From Kitchener I was posted to the trade school in Hamilton, Ontario, on an equipment repair course. We spent six weeks learning to make kit bags and repair tents and other canvas items that the army used. There were approximately 5,000 men at the school, and only fifty of us CWACs – so we were quite popular, and treated with lots of respect. All kinds of different trades were taught there, including cooking – and we ate where the cooks were being trained. Needless to say, we had delicious meals! I still remember the pies and cakes.

I left Hamilton with a posting to Halifax, where we worked with the Royal Canadian Ordinance Corps (RCOC). The Ordinance Corps (now called Base Supply) handled all the clothing and other supplies for the army, from vehicles to pots and pans. (Later, this was changed and in 1944 the motor vehicle and electrical equipment sections were run by the newly created Royal Canadian Electric and Mechanical Engineers (RCEME).)

The authorities decided that much of the ordinance work in Halifax was too heavy for girls, though, so they put us to work in the clothing stores. I also worked in the canteen there. We worked hard, and we were under strict supervision – we always had to be in by 10 p.m., and we were confined to barracks one night a week to clean the barracks and our rooms.

But that didn't mean we didn't have some fun! If we finished early, we would get permission to go out to the corner fish-and-chip shop: two or three girls would go and bring back all the orders. That was a treat we all looked forward to. We had one late pass a week, when we were allowed out until midnight – on those nights we usually took in a dance or a show. We had a weekend pass once a month too, although we didn't have the money to go far.

I had one special friend from Halifax named Gladys Melanson. We worked in the same shops, attended church together, went to shows and dances together, and did many other things as well. She was a very nice person and a good friend. She was originally from River Hebert, Nova Scotia, but after she married they settled in Halifax. I would really like to locate her if I could.

I continued working for RCOC Stores when I was posted to Saint John in early November 1944. We made up requisitions to be sent out to different units in New Brunswick Command. But I didn't stay there long and in 1945 I was posted again, to the Department of Return Stores in Fredericton. By this time, the war was over and the men were coming back from overseas. When they came to be discharged, they had to turn in some of their kit items, and we had to clear them through our stores.

We would often find some interesting things in the pockets, such as pictures and love letters! And we met a lot of happy soldiers, returning after several years overseas. One of them was my husband-to-be, who returned in September after serving six years in Europe. I stayed in the army until I was married, on November 3, 1945, and then

I was discharged. (I would've liked to have stay in, but the army decided to disband the CWAC in 1946.)

My wartime experiences were very exciting, and I enjoyed every day of my military career – travelling and meeting new people. When I look back, those were some of the best years of my life. We had lots of discipline, but it made us better people. Some people don't think women should join the forces and I've heard many people say they wouldn't want their daughters in the army. But I felt very proud to have served, and whenever I hear young people considering joining the military, I always encourage them. Basic training is the worst part – the first month is the most difficult! But after that, they have a good career.

I attend reunions every year, and really enjoy meeting all the ex-CWACs. Last year, 1999, the 50th reunion was in Oromocto, New Brunswick, where I live. Another ex-CWAC, Della Sprague, and I organized that reunion. There was a good turnout, and we all had a really good time.

Jessie Jack –
née Hughes

I lived in Calgary, Alberta, where I was attending junior high school in the fall of 1939. My father was a sergeant in the Lord Strathcona Horse (Royal Canadian) regiment. The horses were beautiful creatures. We weren't allowed to go near them, but I always enjoyed watching them on parade – especially when they did the ceremonial musical ride, which closely resembled the current RCMP Musical Ride. When war was declared, my father and his regiment were sent overseas almost immediately. We felt proud about his posting, but apprehensive.

There was much hustle and bustle as a result of the outbreak of war. After years of depression, much unemployment, long bread lines and hungry people – suddenly, life had taken on a new purpose. It didn't seem long before the city was a sea of uniforms: army, air force, the Calgary Highlanders, and a host of other regiments. The navy attracted a lot of prairie men and boys who had never expected to see the sea. Several RCAF stations sprang up in Calgary, some of which trained aircrew in the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan: we had young men from all over Canada, Great Britain, New Zealand and Australia. Boys too young to go to war joined the cadets, preparing to be ready for the army, navy or air force when their turn came.

As more and more men enlisted in the armed forces, women began to take on more jobs outside the home. Red Cross groups were organized, doing work to make life a little better for those serving in the air, the battlefields and on the seas. These ladies rolled bandages and knitted socks, sweaters and scarves.

As soon as I was old enough, in 1943, I enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force (Women's Division). I don't remember reading any recruiting posters, although the radio and newspapers were always appealing for people to enlist. I joined up because of patriotism, and chose to join the WDs because I had always had a fascination with flying.

I received basic training at Rockcliffe, in Ottawa, and then attended a six-month War Emergency Training Plan course in Toronto. My first impression of the RCAF was a positive one. I enjoyed the drill, parading, and meeting the other girls I worked and lived with. I learned drill, typing, Pitman shorthand, air force procedures and administration – and more drill! I was thankful that I could learn administration skills, as that trade would not only be useful in the WDs but would also serve me later, after my discharge.

In Ottawa, our WD Flights appeared in several Victory Bond parades. Many were attended by celebrities such as Jeannette MacDonald and Herbert Marshall, both well-known movie stars of the era. Jeanette had a beautiful soprano voice, and had appeared in several semi-classical movies – most often with Nelson Eddy, who was a baritone. Herbert played more dramatic roles. I found both of them approachable but reserved. At one parade, we had the honour of being the first air force flight to march in parade with the newly formed RCAF Pipe Band. They looked quite splendid in their RCAF tartans.

In October 1943 I was posted out to Vancouver, eventually ending up in Boundary Bay, British Columbia. It was in the Fraser Valley, about twenty miles south of Vancouver – but today there's nothing left to show that there was once a huge air force station there! When I got there, it was just being readied for the arrival of the trainees, who would arrive in June 1944. The station would eventually hold some 2,000 personnel, plus the trainees – of whom 200 were WDs.

Every Monday morning there was a CO's parade in the square. He always inspected the WD Flight. WDs who worked shifts – such as the wireless operators, flying control personnel or medical staff – were excused from the CO's parade, but we WDs from the Administration section were always expected to attend. Most of these were Investiture Parades, for the purpose of presenting awards. Many of our personnel (including some trainees) had already served in the European theatre and earned medals; and the awarding of their honours was finally catching up with them.

I eventually obtained the rank of Corporal, Administration. I served under four commanding officers, all of whom had put in their stint in Europe. One was an RMC graduate, full of "spit and polish," and another was the youngest Group Captain in the RCAF. I liked them all: they were confident, honourable people who commanded respect, and also had compassion when it was called for.

Although I was considered part of the station Orderly Room, I actually worked in a two-person office known as the Secret Registry. We kept tabs on the secret and confidential files, and were available for dictation to anyone from the CO down to the WD officers. Our main employer was the Adjutant, the CO's "right-hand man" and the officer in charge of the OR. I also acted as court stenographer on some investigations and courts of inquiry.

At our station, there were a number of different aircraft in use at different times. The planes our instructors and trainees mostly used were large bombers, B24 Liberators and B25 Mitchells. There was the DC-3, also known as the "flying box-car"; the Canso, which was equipped with pontoons as well as wheels so that it could land on land or water; and some small two-seater Harvards. I was able to have a number of familiarization flights in these: I went for rides in a DC-3, a Canso and a Harvard. In this last, I had a "flip" – the pilot thrilled me with his upside-down flying and several barrel rolls. It was heavenly! (The only awkward thing was having to strap on the parachute and waddle across the tarmac to the planes.)

As our station grew, it became evident that we had some very talented musicians among the personnel. They began to get together after duty hours, and eventually formed our station band. Of course, this was the era of the "Big Bands" – but our band could rival Glen Miller or the Dorsey Brothers! Their music set your toes tapping at our station dances, usually held on Saturday nights in the Drill Hall. These were always lots of fun.

It was while dancing that I met my future husband, Corporal William W. Jack. This was in the fall of 1943, in the WD canteen, where some of us had gone to dance to the juke box. Bill and I made a pretty good dance team. From then on, we attended all the station dances together; and if we were lucky enough to get a 48-hour pass at the same time, we would go into Vancouver, book in at the Y and explore the city. We grew on each other, and became engaged in the spring of 1945 – though we decided to wait until the end of the war to get married.

I stayed at Boundary Bay for the entire war, and was still there for both V-E and V-J Days. We were all confined to camp both days, as the authorities felt that some celebrations might get too exuberant! Celebrations on the station were joyous. There were no ticker-tapes or firecrackers, but the air-raid and fire-engine sirens blew all day long. On V-J Day, some of us were given a ride on one of the large station fire trucks, with all its sirens blaring. I guess there was a lot of drinking, but I wasn't one of the imbibers and don't recall seeing anyone who had overindulged. There were just a lot of happy people cavorting around, looking forward to getting on with their lives.

We were all very happy that my father came home safe from overseas in the summer of 1945. He had served in Great Britain as a Signals Instructor for nearly the whole six years he was away. A few years later, in 1948, he received his honourable discharge from the Lord Strathcona Horse after serving for thirty years.

After V-J Day, Bill and I made our wedding plans and were married within the month in Calgary, where we were both from. After a short honeymoon in Banff, we returned to Boundary Bay to await our discharges. I helped fill out many forms for men and women eager to get back home – discharges were coming through fast and furious. Mine came through in October, and Bill's a month later.

Transition back to civilian life was just fine. I had a wonderful husband and obtained a secretarial position immediately. It was rather boring after the air force, but it did pay better. I kept working until I became pregnant with our first child. Bill and I have been married fifty-five years, raised two wonderful daughters and are now blessed with four equally wonderful grandchildren.

During my WD service I met many terrific people, both male and female – some I still keep in touch with. I don't know exactly how the civilian population viewed us, but to my knowledge no WD was ever harassed or treated with disrespect. We did our jobs, we did them well, and were proud to do so. In the years after my discharge, I met many women who expressed regret that they hadn't taken advantage of the chance to join the WD, CWAC or the WRCNS.

In 1966, I attended the 25th anniversary of the Women's Division, at the University of British Columbia. It was full of nostalgia and brought a few tears, but it was lots of fun. While a friend and I were walking on the campus, we passed a fire engine stopped at a red light.

"Do you remember when we rode on the station fire engine on V-J Day?" I asked my friend.

She laughed and said, "I sure do!"

Well, the driver of the fire engine overheard us, and he offered us another ride. So we hopped on the back, and away we went! The driver turned out to be an ex-RCAF man, and he was enjoying our reunion almost as much as we were. He took us all over the UBC campus, then dropped us off at the dormitory where we were staying.

When I look at the forces now, personally I feel that integrating the three services was a mistake. It is difficult to know who or what anyone is any more, and the ranks have no meaning for me. I liked it better when the navy, army and air force each had its own identity. Today the armed forces are undermanned and poorly equipped. Sending them out to some places with outdated equipment is an embarrassment to our country, and does a disservice to the men and women who serve.

Instead of women having to compete for the "he-man" types of jobs, I would like to see them have their own service – one that would enhance the Department of National Defence. I don't wish to see women in positions that require muscles, such as combat positions. But there are many other interesting and challenging jobs in the Canadian Forces that women could do with diligence and pride.

Marjorie Adams –
née Davis

I was born in Toronto, and grew up during the Depression. Many people were out of work then, and you would see the homeless people making fires in rubbish bins and sitting around them. My father was out of work too. He had been working at a luggage factory; but people weren't travelling because no one had any money, and he was laid off. So he made himself a rig with a ladder and went around to do painting and hanging wallpaper. My mother scrubbed floors for our landlord to earn the money to keep my sister and me dressed nicely.

Although there weren't many jobs, we all worked if we could – only people from families with money had the opportunity to pursue post-secondary education and qualify for a better job. My friends and I found jobs at the Neilson's chocolate factory. When we finished work on a Wednesday or Saturday night, we would hurry and get washed up so we could go dancing at the Palais Royal down on the lakeshore. (We used to keep our good clothes in our locker, and spray perfume on our hair to cover the all-pervading scent of chocolate.) Glenn Miller, Louis Armstrong, Count Basie and all those great bands played at the Palais.

The radio was kept going all the time at Neilson's, and I was at work when I found out that the war had started. All the First World War veterans were very upset that another war had broken out – they knew this was going to be big. The men who had fought in the first war were mostly too old to sign up for this war; but when the new soldiers were joining up, the vets would always try to tell them what to look out for. A lot of the people enlisting thought they were going on a big holiday, and didn't realize what they were getting themselves into.

Many of the men who came home from the First World War were in pretty bad shape – and of course, many didn't come home at all. All my father's brothers went; two died from the gas after they came home. But my dad wasn't able to enlist in that war himself: he had had a nasty accident when he was a young man that had cost him half his foot. He had been shopping in Eaton's, didn't get into the elevator fast enough and the elevator door closed on his heel and took it off! He was in the hospital for a long time and when he got out, he had just a stump there. He had to have a leather insert made for his boot to be able to walk straight, and couldn't get accepted into the army.

All the boys were getting called up to go overseas, and we were still going dancing at the Palais. It was strange to be left behind. Before, we used to stand around the edge of the dance floor and the boys would walk around and pick a girl to dance with. But now, the crowd kept getting smaller as the boys left – and it was getting harder to find dance partners! Sometimes there would be nobody to dance with unless we girls got up and danced on our own. There were only two boys left on our street: my sister went out with one, and I went out with the other.

Then my sister's steady boyfriend went overseas too, and we all felt bad for him. None of the women wanted their men to go – those who were married and had children, in particular, were devastated. All the women left behind thought about their loved ones overseas, in danger all the time, and the radio news was always on. It was terrible, always waiting for news. (And even when a man did return, it was often hard to adjust after years of separation.)

I finally became tired of the smell of chocolate and left Neilson's to work at Eaton's, ticketing hosiery and gloves. I worked myself up to salesgirl, making 7 dollars a week. That paid for my streetcar fare, and I was dressed as well as anyone else. (I always did spend my money on clothes!) Then I went to work at Union Carbide, assembling carbons. They looked like little shells, and went into guns and tanks. There were various materials to put in them, but we didn't deal with gunpowder. We all thought about the men overseas and how important that it was to do our jobs well, because even little mistakes could cost a life. Inspectors constantly reviewed our work.

Our company employed over a hundred people. We all wore the same thing every day: a blue smock that buttoned up in front and had a beige collar and cuffs. We had to wear flat shoes for safety. But the real danger was the carbon dust; it was terrible. We weren't given masks, though, because in those days they never thought of that kind of workplace protection – even though the Carbon Company had comparatively good working conditions. My only complaint would have been that although men and women worked together in the factory, the men were paid more. But in those days we never thought about it – that was just the way it was.

Overall, our bosses were good to us. Our manager came down one day and said that they wanted to get more women into war work. My friends Dorothy, Bernice and I were asked if we would be willing to model uniforms. They bought us new shoes, stockings and uniforms, trying to make war work look glamorous. The big signs used for advertising said things like, "Come into war work and help the war effort with good pay." Well, that part was true – we made wonderful money, 20-30 dollars per week, and extra for the modelling.

Fashions were quite different back then. Skirts were mid-calf length, there were no miniskirts. Instead of pantyhose we had lisle stockings, which looked like nylons but were a bit heavier. They started bringing in nylons as I got older – the old-fashioned kind with the seam up the back. We didn't want to wear stockings on our summer holidays, though, so we used to put pancake makeup on our legs and draw a line up the backs with eyebrow pencil, so it looked as though we had stockings on!

Before the war, women didn't wear much makeup – only face powder, lipstick and a little bit of rouge. Eye shadow and mascara were considered only for actresses and movie stars; ordinary women never bothered with their eyes. But during the war, I think it became more common for women to wear more makeup: they would want to look nice to meet the boys coming home. So we all started to put on makeup, do our legs and get permanent waves in our hair. (Back then, perms were done with hot electric curlers covered in a cap. Sometimes you'd smell your hair burning!)

One fashion I really couldn't stand was the zoot suits: they had big lapels on the coats, and pants that bulged at the top and then went very narrow down around the ankles. The boys who wore them didn't go to war; they just bummed around as a sign of rebellion, and spent their time standing on street corners trying to pick up girls. These "zoot suiters" wore big hats, pointed shoes and long chains; their hair would be slicked back, with long sideburns. There were lots of jokes about zoot suiters taking all the soldiers' girlfriends. (Though some women would wear zoot suits too, with skirts, jackets and fedora hats.)

For entertainment, we younger people often went to shows – you would pay ten cents for the afternoon. (If you saved ten foil chocolate-bar wrappers, you got into the show for free – the wrappers could be recycled into war materials.) Black and white and silent movies were still popular, although sound came in during the 1930s and then colour arrived right before the war. Musicals were a big thing too. A lot of movies were made during the war, because people wanted to get out and see a movie to keep their spirits up. There were some war movies, but mostly they were more upbeat – comedy such as Abbot and Costello. Everybody liked the cartoons too, such as *Betty Boop* and *Bugs Bunny.*

Television was very rare back then. The man who lived next door to us was the first person we knew to have a television. But after he got one, my uncle went out and bought a tv too, and then my family finally got one. In Canada, television wasn't used to spread propaganda and hatred, as was happening in Germany. For us, it was more like "defend God and the country for our side." It seemed the Germans and the Japanese believed that we were their enemies, and wanted to kill us and get us off the map.

Television was a big thing for us because when I was growing up, people didn't have many of the appliances we take for granted today. We didn't have vacuum cleaners or refrigerators – we had iceboxes instead. The iceman would come and bring a block of ice for it. When one of my friends got a refrigerator, she was so thrilled that she came running down the street to tell us about it! These new inventions were very exciting to us.

Mostly, though, all we thought about was where our boys were going. We heard about Belgium, France, Germany, Holland and all those places. One country I had never even thought about before was Norway, until some Norwegian airmen were stationed on St. George Street in Toronto. I had a friend named Elsie Berg whose Norwegian mother was a friend of my mother, and Mrs. Berg took in quite a few of these airmen. Mrs. Berg had a huge house, and she and her husband and Elsie lived on the bottom floor while a dozen or so of these chaps had the other rooms.

She began teaching them English, and they learned to speak it rather brokenly – but considering all they had to learn, and the stress they must have been under with culture shock and the war, they did pretty well. Elsie and I went out with them a few times, but of course she could understand them, and I found it quite difficult. Some of the men married Canadian girls, and then Mrs. Berg would teach the wives Norwegian. (After the war the King of Norway invited Mrs. Berg to visit there, and presented her with a citation for what she did for those airmen and their Canadian brides.)

Before the war there were people from other countries in Toronto, though there are a lot more now. There were people from Greece, Holland and even Germany, and a few oriental people. I didn't know many people from other ethnic groups then, because we kept ourselves pretty separate. But now I know all kinds, and have learned to live in harmony with other peoples.

When I heard about the Jewish people and what they went through during the Holocaust, it was hard to believe. I knew one woman who escaped from Germany with her husband and two sons, in a little boat. They had only one loaf of bread, and had to divide it to survive. She still had the stamp on her arm that meant she was Jewish, from the concentration camps. Jewish people used to hide their stamps until they got to a place where people weren't against them, such as Canada – they felt safe here.

I think that after people learned about the Holocaust, they felt sorry for the people with the stamps and this brought other groups in society closer to the Jewish people. Of course that depended on the individual – it depended on how you were brought up. Some people just hate.

When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, we heard about it right away. Everybody thought it was terrible, especially since a lot of Canadian and American families were intermixed. The attack didn't seem to change the attitudes towards the Japanese people here as much as it did in the U.S., though we felt bad about it too. It was a shame. In Hawaii there's a wall that lists all the names of the men who were killed at Pearl Harbor. Even so, everyone was upset to hear about the atomic bombs being dropped on Japan, and the staggering number of people who were killed or disfigured.

There were casualties at home too – many families we knew had somebody who had died. In those days, people lived on a street forever and everybody knew one another. If you were walking along and saw black crepe on a door, you knew that someone had died in that house. The crepe would stay up for a week or two, and the neighbours would come in and visit during the wake. When someone died, the men would wear black armbands as a sign of respect, and our mothers wore black ribbons around their straw hats.

I was vacationing at Rice Lake with my family when we heard that the war was over. There was a radio up in the trees that played constantly, so everybody would know how things were going with the war. When we heard British Prime Minister Winston Churchill come on and announce that the war had ended, people all came running out of their cottages yelling and singing – everyone was so excited! It took me back to a time I remembered as a very young child, when the men came home from the First World War. My father told me that there were celebrations downtown, and someone brought an old piano out into the street and everyone was dancing. There was such jubilation!

Our men returned home from this war in trains, many of them to the big Exhibition Grounds in Toronto. When one friend came back from four years overseas, I went with his mother to meet his train. They invited me back to their home to join them for supper; and the mother made my friend put his kit bag with his uniform and all his army stuff downstairs in the cellar, as if she was ashamed of it. I felt so bad for the poor boy. But in retrospect, I wonder if that was her way of showing her anger over the worry of having her son away for so long?

Many men came home bringing new wives from abroad. Some people were against these war brides: there was some jealousy that the boys had met someone from over there, rather than from here. But in Toronto, people generally accepted them and took them in. Really, it depended on how close the family was: if the son had kept his family here informed, they would be more accepting; but if he hadn't talked much to them, then they'd wonder what was going on.

My cousin Morris married a war bride, and we thought the world of her. She was from England, as many were – though a lot of the fellows married Dutch girls too. Most of the fellows brought back their new brides; only a few stayed overseas with them. Most of the boys I knew, though, came back to the girlfriends they had left behind. (But sometimes they came back and found they weren't in love any more – as happened to my sister.)

And sometimes people were changed when they came home. When my sister's boyfriend came back safely, we had a "Welcome Home" party for him. But I was shocked at his behaviour: before he left, he was against smoking cigarettes or taking a drink, and would look at me scornfully if I did those things. When he came back, though, he was doing both himself – and he kept asking me to dance!

One of the things that happened after the war was meeting my husband, Bob Adams. He was the brother of my married friend Dorothy, and he'd seen my picture when he was still overseas. Dorothy had sent him photographs of her wedding to Ken, and Bob had spotted me in the wedding party and said he wanted to meet me when he got back. Our friends kept trying to set us up together, saying that Bob was just right for me and would be calling. Finally Bob did call me, and they were right!

We were married in 1948, and my husband was able to open his business, the Adams Printing Company. (He had sent home all his pay during the war, and his mother had saved it for him.) People wanted to better themselves after the war was over, they were all for getting back to work and making money. We lived in my parents' house – it was common then for young people who got married to live with their parents for a while. It was common too for older people to live with their children – my grandmother lived with us, and my mother cared for her.

(My grandmother, who was from Prague, always dressed in long black skirts and wore a black cape and hat. With her hair up in a bun, she looked like a priest. But when she let her hair down, it reached almost to her feet. Once my mother was taking a tray upstairs to her, and saw my grandmother standing at the top of the stairs wearing a long white night gown and with her long white hair down. She looked like a ghost! My mother was terrified, and fell down the stairs.)

I think the war increased our sense of community. Everybody was so close and so friendly, and we women would knit socks and send them to the men overseas. The others all laughed at me because I started knitting a pair of socks at the beginning of the war, and never did finish them. I can sew, but I'm no good at knitting!

The war also helped the travel industry, because when the men came home they would talk about being in Europe, in France and Belgium, and other people would become interested and wonder what the world was like. My own husband was always talking about the war and his army adventures. We used to love listening to his stories. He was in Holland when the Canadians liberated the Netherlands, and also fought in Italy and Sicily in the artillery.

He told us that when he was in Italy, he met a little orphan boy whose house had been bombed and who was just running along the road, crying. Bob and his fellow soldiers felt so bad for this little boy that they lifted him up into their truck and "adopted" him. He used to call my husband "Sargenti." They had a little soldier outfit made for him, and took him all over Italy with them – wherever they went, he would go with them.

But when they had to leave Italy, they couldn't take him with them across the border and had to leave him behind. Their notice to move came so fast that they didn't have time to place him anywhere. They all felt bad, and he cried. I guess someone there probably took him to an orphanage.

Bob and I were married for forty-four years, and had three children – a son and two daughters. He died in 1992, and was buried in our family plot in Prospect Cemetery, in Toronto. As a veteran, he was given a full military funeral, performed by members of his Legion. The veterans were always a very thick group, and they all came to see him at the funeral parlour – even though some of his friends could hardly walk. They were all wearing their poppies and took them off and put them on his coffin – the whole hood was covered in red poppies. I'll never forget that sight. When he was buried, a Canadian flag was draped over the coffin with his hat and medals on top. The horn played *The Last Post,* and all the soldiers present saluted.

Many of the returning veterans seemed more liberated with regard to other ethnic groups than those who didn't go overseas. Travel to other countries combats racism because exposure breaks down prejudice – it gives one the opportunity to learn more about other peoples' customs and culture. The more you travel, the more you feel for other people. I've travelled throughout Europe from Belgium to Rome, tracing my husband's footsteps where he fought, and have always found it so.

Even those of us who stayed home went through some of the same things: people from different cultures mixed far more than they had before the war. From my experiences, I became more compassionate for people in general, thinking about what we had all gone through. I think schools should encourage children to learn about their own culture and others. I also believe that it's important for coming generations to learn about the two world wars, and to understand what the war veterans went through in order to give them a better place to live in.

The Ministry of Veterans Affairs took good care of me: when my husband was ill, it sent nurses to help me look after him. And when he died, it told me about the pension fund for widows of war veterans. If I was ever in need, I could still get that money. But the veterans are all dying off, or else getting so old that they don't go out much any more – hardly any of them go to the Legion nowadays. Some family members of veterans still go, such as my son – he's an affiliate member. But our fear is that the great sacrifices people made will gradually be forgotten, if the young people today don't learn about it in our schools.

Tish Herbert –
née Manley

One fine day in July 1943 I accompanied my friend Elizabeth to a recruiting office in downtown Toronto, where she was to be sworn in to the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service (WRCNS). Afterwards, the officer in charge answered people's questions (most of which were mine!) about the training, and the opportunity to make a worthwhile contribution to the war effort. I was quickly convinced that adventure would be more interesting than any schooling – and the uniforms were very smart, even back in the days when they were topped with those "pork pie" hats.

So I enlisted too. There were very few categories available in the summer of 1943, so I chose to be a Messenger. I hadn't considered how my parents would react to the news, but I certainly do recall their expressions. My mother was stunned, since my future had been all planned for me. But my dad, father of three daughters, accepted my sudden change of plans with a grin!

(My sister Joyce had joined the RCAF WD in its early days, and was stationed in Ottawa until her marriage to P/O Howard Smith in 1944. My eldest sister Mary moved to Toronto, and worked in a factory where she made gun sights for bombers. Her husband, Don Burke, had enlisted in the Army Engineers in September 1939, and was overseas for six years. He was a Major on the staff of General Montgomery.)

Dad was a very dedicated Air Raid Warden in his section of the Kingsway, and my mother should have been given a "Mother Medal" – if only because she made disappointments such as shortages of gas, butter, sugar and such seem so trivial, and her solutions so superior! My parents taught mostly by example, and made sure that I knew the difference between right and wrong, fair and unfair, and responsible and irresponsible behaviour. In my teens, I learned that this meant living with the consequences of my decisions – including my decision to enlist. I have to confess, for the next month or so I pretended more enthusiasm than I felt, and cherished every minute spent with friends and family before I went to "sea."

One thing cheered me up: Liz showed me the list of personal items we had to acquire. One of them was a soap dish – which seemed so silly to me, amongst all the serious lists of the day. Considering that in my home we shared a single bar of soap, I'm embarrassed to recall how I looked forward to possessing my very own soap dish!

On September 23, 1943, I reported to HMCS Conestoga at Galt, Ontario, to begin my basic training. I was ready: in my luggage I had a nice new soap dish, with a lid, and a bar of soap!

I'd been assigned an upper bunk in a block known as Nelson. We were given the first of several shots in the arm, and an interesting selection of clothes – as well as lots of instructions. Best of all about that day, though, was meeting a roomful of eager and interesting women from many provinces, as well as Newfoundland – new-found friends!

During the next few weeks we learned much about the navy, including its traditions, obligations and language. We became familiar with expressions such as "tiddley" (which meant neat, tidy and correct). Or "pusser" – that was strictly according to rules and regulations. We did much marching as well; it seemed that was everyone's favourite!

Before our "graduation," my parents drove to Galt to see if the WRCNS met with their approval. They were so pleased (and relieved, I'm sure) to note my "above the collar" haircut, no nail polish, sensible shoes, smart uniform – and they were happy that I was with new friends just as nice as my old ones. I was happy to hear that they were proud of my hasty decision. (Some days, standing on the parade square when it was very hot, I wasn't so sure myself!)

With our training days at an end, there was much to look forward to. When we were no longer probationary wrens (or "probies"), we would be drafted to places all across Canada to further our knowledge of whichever trade we'd chosen: Coders, Writers, Visual Signallers, Wireless Telegraphers, Motor Transport Drivers, Librarians, Cooks, etc. Off everyone went to be trained to become truly useful.

All but one – me! I was drafted to HMCS Conestoga! I moved to a once-lovely hotel in the town of Hespeler outside Galt, in what is now Cambridge. (Before the war, guests there had enjoyed the hot springs and the beautiful hillside gardens surrounding the hotel.) A navy bus transported those of us who worked at Conestoga to and fro. I settled in there quite happily for a while, although I was sorry not to be part of the noble effort, as I'd expected. My temporary work there was making signs, even though I was a Messenger. Someone must have known I'd planned to be an art student!

Still, I did have a few adventures. One weekend I was assigned to stand guard beside an enormous torpedo, part of a military display. I memorized all the details about the equipment so I could answer questions, and really enjoyed talking to the people who attended. Many of them had connections – friends or relations – in the WRCNS or RCNVR.

Socially, too, we had some fun. Some very kind people in the Galt area would phone in requests for two or three wrens to share their Sunday dinners, and made us feel really welcome. And on the weekends, some of us girls (chosen mainly for our lack of height!) would sometimes be bused to a nearby town to dance with the young Sea Cadets there. The lads were really great kids, but we hadn't a lot to talk about!

The only downside to this period was that my second TABT shot landed me in the infirmary. When I was well again, I found out that I'd be drafted to HMCS Protector in Sydney, Nova Scotia. At last I'd be seeing the navy, and the Atlantic Ocean, and more of the world!

En route to the east coast, we stopped briefly in Toronto's Union Station, and I was met by my parents, my sister and my best beau. There was just time to say "Good-bye for now," but no time to tell them that I was making a dreadful mistake by leaving them. What was I thinking? I wanted to change my mind and just go home with these beloved people – and anyone was welcome to adopt my soap dish! Perhaps fortunately, no one heard me think these things...

It seemed a very long journey to Cape Breton, but on November 11, 1943, we few wrens joined those already in residence at the Point Edward site of HMCS Protector. We had our own barracks block, but we ate in the stoker's mess. We never felt comfortable or even welcome there: too many roaches had found their way into our food! We soon decided to eat only bread and butter, topped with brown sugar. Luckily for our health, the office we worked in had a cafeteria, run by a civilian lady from Sydney named Mrs. McKinnon. It was she who probably saved us from starvation, with doses of tinned cherries and buttered toast!

Our work as messengers was much like being postmen. We worked out of the Communications Office, a busy place with a very handsome and pleasant young lieutenant in charge. We delivered the communications by hand, on foot. My chum and co-worker Noreen Beasley would head off in one direction, and I would go in the other. We did two trips a day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. In November, this became more difficult as we struggled through deep and sticky mud. Then in the new year, we plodded through deep snow.

We were issued service galoshes, the kind with buckles on them. But by the time we'd been out once in the morning, they'd be soaked. Fortunately, our pleasant officer would lend me his gumboots for my second route, and supplied me with socks as well to fill them up (since his feet were considerably larger than mine).

Eventually, just before Christmas, all the missing of meals and living on snacks from the cafeteria caught up with us; and Noreen and I both ended up in hospital. On Christmas Eve, the hospital fed me well and then released me to join the other girls in the barracks. This was my first Christmas away from home, and a very sad one, even though I was healthy and back with the other wrens again. What cheered me up was that my mother had sent me a letter earlier, marked "Open on December 24th." She had remembered that I'd always opened one gift before going to bed on Christmas Eve. In the letter, she suggested that if I felt sad or lonely I should look for someone else who was unhappy and see if I could cheer both of us. I found this worked beautifully, and it still does! She was a very dear, wise mom.

And happily, a friend invited me to have Christmas dinner with friends of his family who lived in Sydney. It was a lovely, traditional, quiet holiday, and later I was able to share it with my family by telephone.

New Year's Eve was a time for recalling a few other Auld Lang Synes. Some of us went over to the drill hall, where there was wonderful music. I met a boy who remembered me from the days when we were both Eaton's Junior Councillors in Toronto. We reminisced about mutual friends and memories, and danced the old year out and 1944 in.

I did have one awful experience from this time in Sydney, when I decided to try dyeing my black hair to a beautiful blonde. I was still in the bathroom working on it at "lights out" one night, and the duty officer came in to see why the light was still on. I took the towel off my head, and turned to find her leaning against the wall, laughing hysterically at my brilliant green hair! Needless to say, I washed my hair at every opportunity until it was black again. Luckily, all wrens who worked outside wore hats all the time.

Early that year, I went home on leave. And while it was a wonderful visit, and I was sorry to abandon all the beloved people, kind words and great food again, this time I actually looked forward to returning to HMCS Protector.

Shortly after I got back, the wrens assembled to greet Adelaide Sinclair, our senior Wren officer, who had come to tell us about her trip to Newfoundland. The base there, HMCS Avalon, was being expanded and new barracks built; and eventually, there would be about five hundred wrens at this "overseas" location. It did sound interesting, but seemed much too far away from my friends and family – after the attention I'd received on that wonderful leave, I would have been happy to return to Toronto for the duration of the war!

After her enthusiastic talk, Commander Sinclair asked if any of us would like to go to Newfoundland. Most of those assembled put up a hand. Then she jokingly asked if anyone *didn't* want to go, and only one hand went up – mine. She asked for my name and number before we were dismissed. I left with my two friends: we had weekend passes, and were looking forward to our beds at the YWCA, a sleep-in the next day, and our plans for movies, shopping and eating.

But early Saturday morning I was awakened by a YWCA attendant, asked if I was wren Manley, and told to report back to base and the Wren Unit Officer immediately. I found out that I had been drafted to Newfoundland! Of course I was certain I was being punished for admitting my true opinion. Almost as awful as this was knowing that I was the only person with that opinion, and no one had even cared why! Except for one person, Andy Murray – he was a sailor, a tall, blond, handsome DEMS gunner I had met just before my leave. (DEMS personnel worked on the Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships; but they were RCNVR ratings – and so young!) Nevertheless, we'd shared a few lunches in the cafeteria and had been laughing our way to a fine friendship.

I had to leave the very next day; but before I departed on Sunday afternoon, Mrs. McKinnon arranged a farewell surprise for me. She packed a picnic basket for Andy and me, and told us where we could find fallen logs to sit on in the deep snow. That picnic was such a treat – I'd been so sad, but in no time we were laughing again. (Food always made me happy.) Then we exchanged addresses and said good-bye.

That evening I boarded the passenger ship that would take me to Newfoundland. There were two other wrens on board sharing my quarters, but I didn't know them then. The bunks were in three tiers, and mine was just inches away from the pipes under the ceiling of the deck. The ship was still tied to the jetty, riding up and down, and I was seasick before we even sailed!

As soon as it was daylight and I could find the deck I went out, hoping that the fresh air would help me feel better. It didn't. Nor did anything else until hours later, when we landed in Port aux Basques. It took all the afternoon on land before I felt better, and I vowed to myself that I would stay on Terra Nova's terra firma forever! Port aux Basques was a fairly desolate spot, but it was stationary. I quickly recovered from my humiliating behaviour, realizing that I had survived being seasick – though at times I hadn't really wanted to.

We took the train – the "Little Engine That Could" – from Port aux Basques to St. John's. This train, nicknamed the "Newfie Bullet," apparently had quite a reputation. I've never been sure if the stories were true, but we were told that there were times when the winds could blow the train right off its narrow-gauge tracks! At other times, the engine and Pullman cars moved so slowly that the passengers could walk along beside them for the fresh air and exercise. Inside, though the lower berths in the sleeping cars were enclosed with curtains, as is usual, the upper berths had only handsome wrought-iron "fences," some 8 inches high, to keep one from falling out of bed. There was no privacy!

However, I love trains, and I'm so glad to have had that experience. Those tracks and trains are long gone, since the little train grew up and joined the CNR. There was spectacular scenery along the west coast of the island: the fjords and rocks, the green leaves of spring and the copper-coloured reflections of the setting sun were a most memorable sight.

Eventually we arrived in St. John's and were driven to Buckmaster's Field, the main base there and my home for the next 16 months. It was up on a hill, and there were messes, barracks, a YW/YMCA branch, the drill hall, and so on. The wren blocks were two stories high. Our barracks, like those in Sydney, were not quite finished. There were only about fifteen of us living there to begin with, although many more drafts would arrive later. Since we were designated as "watch keepers," we were assigned bunks and lockers in a quiet location, since someone was usually asleep. We had to check in and out with the Regulating Petty Officers (RPOs) whenever we entered or left the barracks. We were very well supervised at all times.

There were three of us: Toni, Marion and me – I had become acquainted with them on the ship and train. We were each assigned to work with a Leading Wren who was already there, and our three teams of two would cover three shifts every 24 hours. I found that instead of the usual four six-hour shifts of most watch keepers, the original operations staff had been granted the privilege of being on duty from 8 a.m. to noon, noon to 6 p.m., and then from 6 p.m. to 8 a.m. the next morning. It seems that before we arrived, there were nights when the staff on duty knew that some disaster was happening – and they didn't want to leave until it was resolved.

That first day, we were shown around the offices and introduced to the officers, Leading Wrens, plotters, and our tasks-to-be, before the shifts changed at six o'clock. It was a busy and interesting day, and I could hardly wait for my turn to be useful!

I worked about three miles away from our Buckmaster's Field base, near the entrance to the harbour. The location was referred to as Fort William. The building was a long, low, one-storey wooden edifice of white clapboard that looked like any wartime-built office of those days. But looks were deceiving: our office was three stories underground. I would show my pass on the main floor and walk past the Writers, whose duties seemed to me to be those of secretaries. I remember those young women as, without exception, the kindest, happiest and dearest group I have ever encountered. I've often wondered since if those girls weren't chosen for their personalities. Their smiles relieved a lot of my tension!

From the writers' area, we descended several sets of stairs. Navy guards carrying rifles, with fixed bayonets, checked our passes and credentials several times as we went further below ground to the secure level. There we came to the Coders' office, where the Coders, Teletype Operators and other communications specialists worked. They relayed news of any incidents to Operations as fast as they could decode the details.

Once we were admitted to the secure level, we had to go down more stairs to reach the offices of the Navy and Air Force Combined Operations. The RCNVR/RCAF Operations Plotting Room was where the officers decided the route the convoys would take – though we didn't push things around on little sand tables, as is often seen in movies! The navy and air force officers worked from elevated rooms, fronted with glass, which faced a wall map of the world. At one end of the room was a wall map of Newfoundland, with great detail of the island and surrounding areas – from the St. Lawrence in the west, south as far as Norfolk, north to include Greenland, Iceland and the Murmansk Run, and east as far as there was a wall. These maps covered the walls floor to ceiling, and side to side.

The Staff Officers (Convoys) were responsible for routing each crossing. Courses might be changed for reasons such as weather conditions or the presence of enemy submarines. We received updates and information from a locator we called the "Huff-Duff" – perhaps a silly name, but said with great respect! Huff-Duff was short for High Frequency Direction Finder – a form of detection which I'm told made an enormous difference to our success in the Battle of the Atlantic. As well, the regular RCAF flights might detect submarines and protected our convoys from the air. (They flew out of Newfoundland or Iceland and covered the convoys for as long as possible; then, as the ships neared the U.K., Allied planes flew out from Europe and took over.) Finding even a single submarine resulted in a route being changed. Once the convoy was at sea, the Senior Officer of the escort vessels and the Convoy Commodore (often a retired admiral of the Royal Navy in charge of merchant ships) assumed responsibility for any re-routing.

When a submarine was located, the Wren Plotter kept our information up-to-the-minute on a Mercator projection chart. First it was done on a drawing board, and then all the information was transferred to a big wall map. To make these changes, I would scamper up a very tall wooden ladder that rolled along a ceiling rail for the full length of the room, so that one could reach all parts of the Newfoundland or world maps. Reaching the Arctic meant being fifteen feet in the air! If someone climbed to the top of the map to place a pin in the Arctic, and then the ship was nearing the Azores the next day, we would know someone important was aboard: the ship was moving too fast for the escort vessels to keep up with it. "Welcome, Mr. Churchill!" we would think to ourselves. (The VIPs always travelled on the *Queen Mary* or the *Queen Elizabeth.*)

Naval escort ships worked in designated groups. Ships escorting merchant vessels departing from ports in North America were often on the Triangle Run from St. John's to Halifax to Boston. While the merchant vessels continued across the Atlantic in either direction, another group of warships (with escort designations such as C-1 or C-3) would hand over their charges at sea, before coming to St. John's harbour for a little respite. The naval escort vessels included destroyers, frigates, corvettes, minesweepers and Fairmiles. (These last were relatively tiny craft, and many people bought them for private use after the war.)

On one occasion, I was able to take the wheel of a minesweeper myself – the *HMCS Burlington.* This was when we were taken out to sea while there were still enemy subs in the waters, to teach us the seriousness of our duties.

As junior person in Operations, I occasionally relayed information received from the Army radar station at Cape Spear, using the radio equipment in the Ops room to confirm the positions of incoming ships entering St. John's harbour in dense fog. (Usually visual signallers worked from the top of the Newfoundland Hotel, using an Aldis lamp to send Morse code to bring them in.) The first time I spoke to a person out at sea, I was told to speak clearly and give the positions. We had to realize what a serious thing we were doing, speaking to this disembodied voice from out at sea.

The old Newfoundland Hotel was situated right on a hilltop, as were many of the interesting older buildings: some charming old houses, churches, government buildings and the newer naval establishments. It was a steep climb up the hill, and I often paused halfway up or down to admire the fine view of the harbour while I caught my breath. It always looked as though the people down by the harbour were working like ants, scurrying with activity, frantically rearranging stuff!

It was also a good place to watch, often in awe, when escort vessels would sometimes limp into harbour covered with ice. Several stormy days on the North Atlantic could cause a ship to accumulate a build-up of ice that would cover the rails and rigging inches thick – often thicker on one side than the other. The ship would come in listing at such an angle that I expected it to roll over before the ice could be chipped away. That task was performed by ratings, who swung axes to smash away the ice.

My only regret, during my months in that job, was not being able to share any details with my family – I couldn't really tell them what I was doing with my time. We were all very security-conscious: no occurrence or conversation in the Combined Ops rooms was discussed or repeated once we were off duty, ever! You had to be very careful not to say anything that could be a give-away. The letters I sent home were often shredded because of censoring.

All this was because few secrets were held back from us – and sometimes, the plotting we did was more than just the convoy routes! For instance, two men might ask me out for the next night. I could say "Yes" to both – because I would know (and they wouldn't) that the ship one man was on was leaving the next day.

The most momentous occurrence of all my days as a wren was in May 1944, when one of our RCN ships – the frigate *HMCS Valleyfield* – was torpedoed and quickly sank. St. John's was the closest port to the disaster, and the *HMCS Giffard* brought in some survivors; but many more brave men were lost, including the captain – many sailors lost their lives that day.

That disaster left a lasting impression with me. I had no experience of anyone dying, and no idea how to behave in such circumstances. The only advice I received was to be there, be supportive and be quiet (as in, don't cry). Protestant and Catholic rites were both held in the little chapel on the base, and those of us who weren't on duty stood beside the road and watched the quaint horse-drawn hearses carry the caskets to the cemetery. I felt utterly alone. I don't know if I was quiet or not, but I think I was breathing in time to a drumbeat – panting, not thinking.

I believed that two boys I went to high school with were on that ship, which made it even worse because it was personal. But chances always were that you or your co-workers would know someone in most ships. People came and went, and one had to accept it – though there were times when we just couldn't hide our emotions. Another time, news arrived in the office that the *Highlander* – a British ship used by the Canadians as an escort – had been torpedoed and was sinking. I was really upset, as I knew people aboard; but we were all expected to carry on as though nothing had happened.

(Fortunately, the *Highlander* was saved, although the front was so badly damaged that I think a bus could have driven through it. I'm told they just reversed the engines and went back to the safety of the harbour! We had heard that the ship had been cut in two, which indicated a ramming or being torpedoed. That proved not to be so: later, I found that it had hit an iceberg. But in wartime, when a signal arrived that a ship was sinking, we just assumed it had been torpedoed.)

On D-Day, June 1944, there was obviously something up. The Duty Officer on our watch was a quiet but witty man named Jack Gunn. That day, he called to me: "I need a red pencil, Manley, and is there some cardboard over there? How can I make a circle? Have you got a compass?"

I gave him everything asked for, and he sat there tracing with the red pencil. We were curious to know what he was up to! Finally he got to his feet and climbed the ladder himself – that was when we knew something serious was happening. He pinned the message he'd created on the coast of France, then came back down without saying a word. I couldn't wait to climb up and read his message. It said: "D-Day: considerable activity reported in this area."

"If that isn't the masterpiece of understatements!" I thought.

(Very soon after D-Day, my father sent me a clipping from the *Globe and Mail* of the first casualty to be reported wounded on Juno beach that morning: June 5, 1944. It was my long-time friend Bill Herbert, a lieutenant in the Queen's Own Rifles of Canada (QOR(C)) – who later became my husband as well as my friend. After a few weeks in hospital back in England, he returned to the regiment and was decorated in November by General Montgomery. His regiment came home in December 1945.)

We led fairly lively social lives as well. We wrens bonded together from working so closely, as well as from suffering losses or broken hearts. One of the women I worked with was Elizabeth, whose father was an Anglican minister and a friend of Newfoundland's Governor General. This led to invitations for us to attend dinners at Government House – they would invite other young people, and we played many games. (One was for the women at the party to stand behind a hung-up sheet, and for the men to identify us just from our shoes. It wasn't too difficult to tell Elizabeth and me apart, even in our identical black stockings and oxfords: her feet were long and narrow, and mine were just the opposite.) It was very nice to be in company with non-military people again; and after such an evening I hated to leave their library – with its warm wood panelling, and never a sign of that ghastly green paint that covered all our buildings!

As far as our meals went, we shared the stoker's mess again – though in St. John's, the men were more curious than critical. I ate most of my meals at the YWCA, and spent most of my monthly pay there.

They also kept me stocked with cigarettes – I became a chain smoker in the navy! As well, all three of the high schools I had attended sent me cartons of cigarettes.

But then V-E Day came, and the war was nearly over. We had to prepare for our discharge, a six-week process. I was sent to HMCS Peregrine in Halifax, and from there I went on leave. My family had moved away from Toronto to Sudbury during the war, and it was now home. I was at our cottage there when the Pacific war ended. Suddenly every whistle in the world started going off! I remember my grandmother's face: she didn't say anything, but her face changed – there was such joy, and you could tell she was full of memories. She had two sons in that war, and she had lost another earlier. Luckily for us, none of our immediate family members were lost. But many of our friends were.

Before being discharged I was sent from HMCS Peregrine to Toronto, where I spent some time being examined for the cause of the fierce migraine headaches that had plagued me all my life. There was concern that it might be a brain tumour, and I suppose the military wanted to ensure that I was healthy before discharging me. But the tests just proved that I was suffering from bad headaches; and I was eventually demobbed out of HMCS York in late 1945.

At that time, I didn't want to think about anything but being home. I had been gone for more than two years, and I didn't want to think about the war or the people who weren't coming back. I wanted to think about the people who were coming home. You didn't really realize the war was over until you saw these people and realized that they had made it back – it was like putting check-marks beside their names. It felt so good every time you saw someone who had survived.

My parents were glad to have me home, though they didn't realize how independent I had become. My mother thought I should spend my evenings at home knitting or something! But other than that, I didn't find the transition back to civilian life very difficult. I had two job offers right off the bat, and decided to write real estate advertisements for the *Globe and Mail* in Toronto. Then I was trained to be a clothes buyer for Eaton's – though at the time, I really didn't care that much about fashion. I really missed my uniform: when you got up in the morning, you knew exactly what to put on. After the war, I found it took so much time to choose what to wear, and to put on makeup! I would have been quite happy to still be in uniform – it simplified things.

Bill came home about a week before Christmas. I went to welcome him home, and attended the big party put on by QOR at the armoury in Toronto. We became engaged at the end of 1945 and we married in October 1946. We have three children: Brian, Shelley and Mary. (Bill died suddenly in 1978.)

My experience in the service certainly changed me. I became responsible. Before, I was just about as irresponsible as they come – an idiot who'd join the navy just to have her own soap dish! At age eighteen, I didn't really have any plans and didn't really know what I was getting into when I decided to enlist. Before I was actually in, I must admit to hoping that my father might have enough pull to get me out of the navy again. But after I joined up, I didn't have any second thoughts. I've been glad ever since that I didn't back out.

The most rewarding part was the friendships I made. The service is a very special club to belong to – something I really cherish. My wren friends and I are still close, even after all these years and often without much contact, because we shared so much. It has been challenging trying to keep in touch with people – once women change their names, it's easy to lose track of them! I wish I had kept in touch with more people, at least exchanging maiden or married names and addresses. I used to find the wren reunions (held every three years) wonderfully rewarding – all those hugs! But since most of us are heading for eighty or more nowadays, we don't have quite the same enthusiasm any more.

Two years ago, I had the privilege of returning to St. John's with a group of Second World War veterans representing the RCAF, RCNVR and WRCNS. In the military cemetery there, from a cenotaph among the memorial stones, there's a lovely hilltop view of the harbour and waterfront. On behalf of the Canadian wrens, I laid a wreath in memory of our countrywomen and countrymen who perished – those who had graves, and those who did not. We remembered the battle of the Atlantic, and our mates. The imaginations and courage of people in the war to accomplish some things was incredible.

I think military service changed the role of women in society. This book's title, *Equal To The Challenge,* certainly strikes a chord with me: our years of service made me and my friends feel that we were up to *any* challenge! I felt lucky to be part of something that was so important. When I look back, it was such a glorious adventure for me and for most of the girls I knew.

Nancy Lee Tegart –

née Lee

In 1939, I was working at a good job at the Woodward's service station in Vancouver, British Columbia, serving gas and oil and parking cars. I was making 15 dollars a day, which at that time was good money – many folks were either making that much a week, or they were unemployed. But news of the war was on all the media, and I was anxious to join up – even though we had heard that Woodward's would not rehire anyone who quit to enlist. (Later, they had to retract that!)

In early December 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor; and the whole Pacific Coast was thrown into a fear that they could also attack us. The lights all along the West Coast were turned off as a precaution, so the Japanese couldn't see where to aim their bombs at us. Unfortunately, the authorities didn't give us any warning of this! When all the lights went out, I was on the night shift at Woodward's. (Worse, I was halfway down a suspended staircase, and didn't dare to move because I couldn't see.) The threat of spies was very real back then, even with so many of our Japanese being deported or interned.

I really wanted to go overseas to England – I was born there, in 1912, and came to Canada with my widowed mother to a ranch in Edgewater British Columbia in 1927. But I always had an ache for dear old England; so I contacted my mother's brother there, who was well off, to see if he could get me over. But he just said to be patient and wait, or else come over by myself and join the land army.

So in 1942, I went to the recruiting office in Vancouver and enlisted in the RCAF WD – just because the air force had the first recruiting office in Vancouver.

One thing that really upset me about the recruiting procedure, was the medical. It was given by a male doctor, and I was stripped absolutely naked and required to do several exercises. I should have complained about this, but I was so glad to be accepted that I kept quiet. I certainly wouldn't today!

I did transport training at the old Havergal College in Toronto, and I was asked to consider remustering as an officer. But this I did not want – my father had been refused for service in the First World War because of varicose veins, which I also had. These could become a problem if I stood too much, so I decided to stay in Transport.

We were asked where we would like to be stationed, and we all said "near home." So of course, we were giving the opposite! I was posted to Jarvis Bombing & Gunnery near London, Ontario.

When the WD officer first interviewed me, I had asked her to put me down for overseas service.

"Oh, there's no chance of that," she said immediately.

But I insisted, so she grudgingly made the note. That was in August. Well, in December, working at Jarvis, I was told to get ready to go overseas. Magic words!

I was the only one from Jarvis chosen to go. Many of the other girls, including one transport sergeant, had wanted to go overseas as well, and they were all envious. They asked how I was chosen.

"Did you *ask* to be sent overseas?" I said. They had to admit, they hadn't.

There were twenty-one air force gals in that first group, and after saying our farewells back home we all met in Halifax. It was one of the coldest winters; on the railway trip to the east coast, the brakes would seize up a lot and we had to make many stops for "hot boxes" to defreeze them.

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In Halifax, there were icicles everywhere, hanging on the ships. When we went aboard our ship, we realized that it was crammed with Commonwealth Air Trainees – crowded three deep in hammocks, on tables and underneath. We were treated royally, though, and played bridge with the officers in their lounge and dined with them in their mess. (At first we stole some food for the men, but were promptly stopped – there was only enough food for the people at each table.) Further out, seas became very rough and the lounge furniture had to be roped down.

After a lengthy voyage, we had to stand off the coast of Spain, after being alerted by a Sunderland to the presence of submarines. We finally docked in Glasgow, and travelled by train to London. That was our first experience of a blackout: we walked through London hand in hand, one behind another, with the officer leading us with a shaded torch.

We were given two weeks off in London, since it seemed they weren't quite ready for us at our posting in Yorkshire. I visited a cousin of my father in Exeter, Devon. Then came time to pack our kit bags and head back up north to Yorkshire. It was cold up there. There were a few unpleasant incidents: at one point, some china ornaments – irreplaceable in war time – were "acquired" by some of the girls as souvenirs from the Three Greyhounds, a local pub. That was our first experience of CB, until the culprit owned up.

Our first station was No. 6 Bomber Group HQ, not far from Knaresborough. It was quartered at Allerton Hall, which had been taken over by the government after the owner was caught entertaining a top Hitler aide just before the war broke out. Allerton was our first experience of living in Nissen huts – we were about sixteen girls to a hut, with only one tiny coke-burning heater. (Coke was a derivative of coal, a cheap fuel that was hard to ignite. Coal burned much more easily, but of course only the officers had it.) There was never enough coke, either. Fortunately, every evening at least one girl was detailed to keep the officers' heater going, and would smuggle some coal back for us. But we still spent hours combing the hedgerows for bits of wood to use for kindling.

England took some getting used to. There was the weather, for one thing: Duty on the runways in the fall in skirts was not exactly pleasant. Battle dress, with trousers, did not come in until later in our time in Britain. What a relief that was. But one comic aspect was that our off-duty slacks were some light pastel shade – and the English WAAFs thought they were pajamas!

Then there was the driving. I remember my first day in English traffic as if it were yesterday. I was driving a ration truck that day, a three-ton Bedford lorry, and was rolling merrily along in open country on a beautiful sunny day. At first there was no traffic in sight, but then I saw another vehicle coming towards me – on the wrong side of the road. Then I realized, of course, that it was me on the wrong side! I didn't make that mistake again.

Some incidents stand out in my mind from our time at Allerton. On one occasion, we were inspected by their Majesties King George VI and Queen Elizabeth (the present Queen Mother), who wished to see some of the Canadian girls serving in England. They were wonderful people: all through the blitz, they had encouraged Britons to take heart by going down to the bombed areas and talking to the survivors. But we didn't have the opportunity to speak with them then, though we did at the end of the war – I'll get to that.

And another time, I committed the service "no-no" of trying to bypass the chain of command – to go over the heads of the corporals and sergeants to approach our officer, just as one might do on civvy street. This was not looked on kindly! So in December, (as what I felt at that time was a punishment), I was posted alone to Linton-on-Ouse – an active bombing station near the city of York, and HQ for many satellite stations. It was a permanent peacetime station, so we had proper living quarters: a small house with two large bedrooms downstairs, one small bedroom upstairs, and a bathroom. Each room had a tiny fireplace.

I enjoyed being at Linton-on-Ouse. Life was more meaningful for me there: we knew we were helping to serve the bomber crews – even though we knew that some would come home and others wouldn't. My work was interesting: mostly I was permanently on the Bedford station lorry. But occasionally I would [illegible]tailed to an officers run, often in a small standard van – which I disliked because the accelerator pedal was so small. Every now and again, as well, I drove staff cars around London or to Torquay, Devon. I spent much of my on-duty time in the Transport Driver waiting room, waiting for calls to drive anywhere, anytime.

(I remember one of our transport gals got married, to the driver of a bomb lorry. She was so excited about her upcoming wedding that she announced: "We're going on passionate leave!")

I'd chosen Transport to avoid my medical problems, but I still had some! Once I went to Equipment for new shoes, but they didn't have my size. So I had to get a smaller pair, and drove all day to London and back in tight shoes. The result was a bad bunion. I was sent to London for remedial equipment – the most useful of which was an arch support, better than anything I could get here. (Fortunately I now get a good pension that pays for it, as I can't wear ordinary shoes.)

In York, I found a livery stable where I offered to clean the stables and exercise the horses – I was a horse lover then (and still am now), having lived on a ranch and ridden after wild ones back in British Columbia Most of the horses had been commandeered by the army, but the owner still had a nice little mare called Brenda. One day he gave me permission to take her for a ride along the river. Coming home, I spotted a log and thought she could jump it – I'd often jumped logs while chasing wild horses at home. But that was in a Western saddle, and Brenda's saddle was an English one, a different thing altogether. Well, Brenda managed to throw me off! Fortunately, I was experienced enough not to let go of the reins (which in English riding are joined together, making it difficult to hang on). I made it back to the stable and was happily unsaddling, thinking that no one would know, when the owner said, "So, she dumped you, eh?" Well of course, the ground is always damp over there, so my pants and behind were all muddy!

For a station feeding two or three thousand people, the food at Linton was good – mostly due to the volunteer Canadian cooks; the conscripted English cooks really didn't seem to care. The week I arrived, the butcher in town was trying to get his frozen turkeys ready for the Christmas rush. He was an elderly man, and his hands were blue with cold. I pitched in to help, since cleaning poultry was old hat to me. The dear man was so grateful that from then on, he would give me gifts of ham, tenderloin, eggs and so on. Our billy cans (useless until then) were used most evenings in the billets, as my chum and I ate the butcher's bounty over our wee fire.

Come D-Day, the day to invade France, we girls were confined to barracks so that news of the invasion would not be overheard by enemy ears. The men all flew away to support the Allied invasion of Europe. What a thrill to finally know what was happening, after the awful failure of Dunkirk.

After D-Day, we were all posted to London Headquarters and spent our days driving officers to and from Lincoln's Inn Fields, where our RCAF HQ was located. Instead of living in barracks we had to find our own quarters, which was something new – we had a "living-out allowance," and ate at the Canadian Red Shield, a club for Canadian service people. They had good meals, and we got the newspaper and the news.

I and my friend "Tommy" Thompson enjoyed a bit of gambling on the horse racing, and often had phenomenal luck picking the right horses – though really all we did was take a chance. For instance, out of nine fillies in a race, we picked out one named Heliotrope – and she won. This sort of thing happened so often that finally the sergeant (who took the bets down every day and brought yesterday's winnings back) wanted to know our secret. My friend just held out a closed hand, like the touts at the race track did with a tip for a winner!

I was in London on V-E Day. It was a beautiful day, and all the office windows were open everywhere – and showers of paper were thrown out like confetti.

After the lights came back on in 1945, Tommy and I were in Edinburgh. As part of the celebrations, several Highland clans came marching with their pipes down Princes Street, the main thoroughfare. We watched the celebrations; and then my friends and I were grabbing a bite to eat afterwards at the new Canadian Service Club, when the King and Queen stopped by. They noticed my lingering English accent, and approached us to ask where we were all from. So, I finally got to chat with royalty.

Life in London ended (after a holiday in Ireland) with our transfer to Torquay to assist in sending the guys home. Tommy and I had decided to volunteer for another year, thinking our discharge would net us more money. We were never told, then or later, of the war grant benefits that would have awaited us if we had gone home at once. If I'd known, I would have gone back to school for a veterinary course – I had always wanted to be a veterinarian. I regret this very much.

When I finally did come back to Canada, it had not changed much – except for some rationing. After a lengthy discharge leave, getting back into civvy street was fairly easy. My air force chum and I stayed together, working first in Safeway's fruit department and then going into business farming angora rabbits (with the help of Veterans Aid, which I paid back eventually). But the rabbit business declined once the Japanese and the Italians were back on track with their cheaper labour. So I went back to the interior of British Columbia to the Columbia Valley, and tied Christmas trees and worked at ski and travel lodges. I eventually got married, and went back to ranching.

Our contribution to Canada's war effort was to free the men up for the fight, and keep them company socially – though when we first went over in 1943, some of the men said that it was "Bundles for Britain" they wanted, not "Bags"! However, they soon got over that. We became good enough dart players to take on the men, and we thoroughly enjoyed the English pubs. You could sit in front of a fire and play whist, bridge or darts, all on one pint of beer. It was a real homey atmosphere – I only wish we had the same here.

I never met any resistance to what I was doing, being in the military; and on the whole, the men we worked with respected us – though a few would occasionally let an unkind word out. (One girl used to say, "I don't know how you can stand it!") But mostly they were very good, we never heard an objectionable word from them. Though I do remember one incident when the men were playing cards in the transport office: the stakes must have been pretty high because one of the men, with his back to us, forgot himself and said a no-no word! When he realized we were there reading, he flushed and apologized. We forgave him on the spot, saying "No problem."

I think that women can play a successful role in the military, though I do not think they should take on traditional men's roles such as heavy lifting or engineering – women are not physically built for such tasks. We should try to return to more feminine attitudes, expect more courtesy from men, and encourage them to feel superior (even if they're not!). It pays off, believe me.

Beverly von Baeyer – née Robinson

As the summer of 1938 drew on, we began, even out in Vancouver, to realise that we faced the possibility of war, a war in Europe which might well include Canada. Although the war of 1914-1918 was over before my birth, it was pretty well present in the minds of my generation. While we didn't feel much threatened, there was a definite unease in the air.

But memories of the 1914-1918 war had so influenced people in Canada (as well as those in Europe) that we all hesitated to take a stand against aggression. The Spanish Civil War began in 1936. European leaders ignored Franco's ousting of the elected government in Spain, and also ignored the large number of German, Italian and communist troops that poured into Spain. Franco's supporters were German and Italian, all busily learning the most modern warfare practices. The communists, although officially opposing Franco, were also engaged in practising war there.

This country refused to acknowledge those Canadians who went over to fight against the fascist powers. And when members of the MacKenzie-Papineau Battalion (named for the two leaders, one in

Upper Canada, the other in Lower Canada, during the uprisings of 1837) finally came home, they were ignored and even persecuted by the Canadian government. Dr. Norman Bethune, who early joined the fight against fascism, finally went off to China to continue his work. As late as the 1990s, the first Canadians to fight against fascist powers had no official recognition.

Hitler had "liberated" the Rhineland, saying it belonged to Germany ethnically, that the 1919 decision to award it to France was ridiculous and unnatural. He got away with it. He annexed the Saarland. He took Austria back into the fold of German-speaking lands – according to the news dispatches, the Austrians greeted his troops with delirious joy. Then he marched into and took over the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia, which alarmed the British and French considerably. Enough so that the British ambassador, Nevile Henderson, was sent to Hitler's retreat (fortress) at Berchtesgaden. He returned to England with a big smile and a treaty signed by Hitler. This was a promise of no more take-overs in Europe. The Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, boasted that he had obtained "peace in our time."

But by August 1939, it was evident that Hitler was planning a move into Poland. The Allies, France and Britain, warned him they would fight. After their many back-downs, it was no wonder he didn't believe they were serious and, on September 1, 1939, his troops moved eastward.

The Poles had long relied on the defence offered by the Priapet Marshes to the west of Warsaw, feeling confident that vehicles would be sucked down by the unstable ground. It had saved their country before. Besides, Poland had its superb cavalry. But the summer of 1939 was unusually hot and dry, and the German tanks sped across the normally dangerous swamps while their planes circled contemptuously over Warsaw, dropping a few bombs. Despite the bravery of the Polish Army, the invasion was completed successfully in a few days.

The Brits warned Hitler, demanding a withdrawal by a specific time. When that was ignored, Hitler was astonished, though not deterred, to learn that Britain and France had declared war on the Nazi Germany.

This was September 1. Many of us in Canada had been hanging on every news bulletin that came over the radio, unable to believe the situation, yet furious that Canada didn't immediately follow the Allies, as we called "our side." Only on September 3 came the Canadian declaration, delayed (as we found out quite a while later) to enable about half our navy, which was racing madly down the coast, to reach the western end of the Panama Canal and sail through. The Americans controlled the Canal and would have refused entry to a belligerent power.

The situation took a while to sink in.

All through the 1930s, the Depression battered Canada. The west had a drought so severe, so long, that for years the topsoil simply blew away. Planting just wasted the seed, which either rotted or was eaten by birds and insects. Work was almost impossible to find, and men rode freight cars across the country trying desperately to get a job. Doctors and lawyers were glad to dig ditches for a dollar a day.

Girls, even women, especially on the prairies, wore dresses made from the cotton flour bags. Most women in rural areas baked their own bread, flour was still cheap, and the hard times demanded that the emptied 100-pound bags, which had for a long while been used as dish towels, had also to provide material for clothing. No one liked to wear a dress with the company name blazoned on it; someone had the bright idea of printing the material with flowers and keeping the name inconspicuous. It worked. Clothes were handed down through the family, holidays were unheard of for most people, diets were sparse and luxury but a word, and few could afford medical or dental care.

At this time, I was living with my parents and two younger sisters in West Vancouver, British Columbia. The newspapers carried relatively little foreign news. The Far East meant only India with its rajahs, tiger shoots, and the Indian Army. To my family, the Indian army had special importance because my grandfather had been in it before his marriage. But that was nearly a century ago. As for Africa! The Dark Continent left me with an impression of unending night and no form of civilisation. Europe provided mixed impressions – the glamour of France, the flowers and villas of Italy, and not much else. The word "parochial" comes to mind. But we knew, most of us, little enough about the rest of Canada either. Travel was so much slower, radio just beginning, newspapers and magazines carried the minimum of news concerning the rest of the world. We knew the names of countries but little more.

Then so much began to concern Canada, beginning with the death in 1936 of King George V – the shattering news of the abdication of his eldest son, Edward VIII, after only a few months as monarch; the succession of his younger son as George VI; then the coronation. After the coronation came the great excitement of the royal visit, when King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, parents of the present queen, visited Canada.

The Royal Visit! What excitement it caused, the chance to see a real king and queen. Along with many other teenagers, I raced around Vancouver with a friend, and ended the day with the great satisfaction of having had four glimpses of them. Today, the wonder of the occasion seems exaggerated. But then it was the greatest of events and allayed, at least temporarily, the difficulties of the times.

In 1938, a few far- sighted women, notably Mrs. Joan Kennedy of Victoria and Mrs. Arthur Nation of Vancouver (I think most of us never heard her first name), formed a voluntary organisation known as the British Columbia Women's Service Corps. Another girl from West Van and I joined as soon as we learned of it; she was Josephine Maitland Hamilton-Marshall, daughter of a veteran of the First World War. We wore a simple uniform – white shirt with navy blue tie, plain navy skirt and cardigan or jacket, and navy beret with the BCWSC crest. We learned to form up in threes, drill, do a bit of map-reading, recognise the insignia of the various ranks, and were taught something about elementary military procedures – standing orders, the format for letters and so on. Even a little about the *Army Act.*

Excitement and satisfaction inspired us all, and we took to marching rather than walking, employing any military jargon we could pick up, addressing each other by our surnames, and dreaming of somehow being in the army.

While we waited and longed, those who were able did volunteer work, mostly typing cards with information taken from the men as they enlisted. At that time, we were introduced to electric typewriters, an exciting innovation. Their extra-long carriages moved back at a touch, and impressed us all – until the electricity broke down, as it did occasionally. We worked mainly at Beatty Street Armouries and then at the old Hotel Vancouver.

The imposing grey stone building at the corner of Granville and Georgia, as handsome as the Empress Hotel in Victoria, was torn down after the war to make room for a parking lot, and now the space is covered by some dull stores and offices, utterly without character. The old building epitomised romance, with its spacious, even huge lobby, sweeping staircase, elaborate elevator cages, generous proportions and interesting variety of windows. Someone had the bright idea of using it for local military purposes, under the title of Headquarters, Vancouver Defences.

In the former lobby, trestle tables and some sort of chairs had been set up, an incongruous combination – but it was for the war effort! We sat typing the information onto cards as it was given by the recruits answering a few personal questions about their background. One question embarrassed me considerably until I learned to pose it while turning over the card to fill in the back. This query about possible dependants was, simply, "Do you have a common-law wife?" Most of the men took it in their stride, but one asked me what it meant. When I repeated the phrase we girls had worked out, "a woman with whom you live but are not married to," he reddened and snapped that no, he didn't have truck with that sort.

Late in August, we were told that those who wanted to join the army were to report at 1000 hours on September 17, 1941, to Vancouver Defences, in uniform, with oxfords well-polished and hair neatly off our collars. In Vancouver that day, we numbered about twenty, some from the BCWSC, others from a similar organisation. We were all excited, almost speechless, giggling a bit, proud that we would have our chance, most of us adding a year to our age because of the regulation that one must be twenty-one. Within a few months, this impressive demand dropped to eighteen years. Also within a few months, we were all re-sworn as regular members of the army. From the Canadian Women's Auxiliary Corps we graduated to being the Canadian Women's Army Corps, to our deep satisfaction.

For months we wore our "old uniforms," improved by a three-inch-wide red felt band on the left arm. It bore the letters, in yellow felt, CWAC. Of course there were calls at first of "quack quack" by witty young men, but these we ignored and, after a while, they ceased.

That first day, each of us was assigned to some section of Vancouver Defences, to administration for several, as a driver for one woman (Easton was one of the first female drivers and soon knew as much as most of the men about car repair), and a couple of us, Kathleen Wilkinson and I, to the little HQ unit. My assignment was assistant to the private secretary of the Brigade Major. Few of us thought about the nastiness and horror of war, I suspect; we were so happy, so proud to do what we could.

Because British Columbia had been designated Pacific Command and, therefore, Military District No. 11, our individual numbers began with that. The first twenty numbers had been allotted to Victoria so ours began with 11021, I think. My own, the source of enormous pride, was 11034.

At first, we were called "miss" and treated with wary courtesy. Afternoon tea was served us daily. We would all troop into a large room where a table was set, complete with cloth, tea or coffee and some food, served by the HQ batman. Fred was a gentle, fatherly, grey-haired man with a slight stoop and a friendly smile for everyone. He seemed to enjoy our chatter, laughter and enthusiasm. This preferential treatment didn't last more than a few months. New recruits came swarming in as the public decided we were respectable, more jobs were handed to us, the use of surnames spread and we were accepted.

Uniforms, when they began trickling in by twos and threes, arrived in a box with the recipient's individual number and name on it – we had been measured some time before. The boxes arrived via Victoria from Ottawa, and how we admired the appearance of those first to be outfitted! My own came very late, not until well into 1942, and then only after my boss sent a couple of Teletype messages to Ottawa. He was told to calm down, that the box had been shipped weeks ago. As it turned out, it had – but someone in Victoria Quartermaster Stores decided to give it to a friend ...

Until we had those uniforms, our magnificent pay of about 3 dollars and 15 cents per day was augmented by a clothing allowance and, because we had no military accommodation, a living allowance. Proud though we were of our uniforms, one and all hated bitterly the beige lisle stockings. These were cotton, the same as most of us had been wearing for several years if we couldn't afford silk. Their claim to ill-fame lay in the utter impossibility of preventing them from sagging, despite the best efforts of either a girdle – the old two-way stretch – or a little arrangement called a garter belt. This charming item had a pair of long garters dangling from each side of a narrow cotton band. The contraption couldn't do much with the lisle stockings, a fine cotton knit that held firmly to the principle enunciated by Sir Isaac Newton about the powerful attraction exerted by a larger body on a smaller one. We considered that our legs, be they never so slim, looked more like those of a rhinoceros after an hour or so.

Fortunately the CWAC had officers in Ottawa who fought for and, after some months, obtained permission to wear nylons. They were new at the time and much admired. It was said that one pair could last a year – not quite right, but nylons were much superior to the silk stockings in life-expectancy. It didn't take too long after that for permission to be won for all ranks to look smarter. The colours available for us were a deepish brown, rather like dead leaves, and a dark green reminiscent of the sort of scum that appears on stagnant water. But they fitted, looked nice with the uniform, and did a lot for morale.

My duties were ordinary secretarial work, but included the amending, in spare time, of the copy of the War Establishment. The print was microscopic, the space for amendments minuscule. As no one had touched this volume for years, the confused mess took a long while of hunt-snip-paste. At times it felt as though my army work was mostly with scissors. But even that seemed so wonderful in those days.

From the beginning, we had our own non-coms. Vanessa O'Shea, who had been in a volunteer group similar to ours, and Nancy Hewitt of North Vancouver – I think they were sergeant and corporal respectively at first. Both were excellent, both were among the early ones to attend basic training when the school was set up in Vermilion, Alberta, and among the first at the officers' training school at Ste-Anne-de-Bellevue, Quebec.

Our Commanding Officer was Renée Haweis. She, too, was first class – later she became the respected and loved head of the OTC. She informed us crisply that her name rhymed with "boys" and showed complete impartiality. Come to think of it, I remember only one female officer during my four and a half years who didn't behave in an exemplary fashion – and she was the type that enjoys breaking up marriages.

Notes

1 Connaught Range, a large tract of swampy land on the Ontario bank of the Ottawa River at Shirley's Bay, west of Ottawa, is a major complex of ranges for small- and large-bore shooting. Department of National Defence property since the 1930s, it is still used for national and international shooting events and as a training area for Reserve Force units in the National Capital Region.

A small room where we could leave coats and winter boots, eat lunch and rest a bit, was allotted us. One of the girls created a novel entertainment for the MO when, having confused two paper bags, she handed him the one with her luncheon milk instead of the urine sample. She joined the laughter, and relished the cartoon drawn by one of the girls, James, who was skilled with a pencil. We had good relationships – the novelty, the feeling of our way, contributed to it. And, of course, we were few in number those first months.

When we had to be inoculated, TABT it was, we assumed a nonchalant attitude; after having heard that some of the men fainted, most of us chose to return to work at once, pretending that we didn't feel anything, pretending that the experience had affected us not a bit.

One crazy day, all of us were taken from our various offices, handed a rifle and told that word had come down that we must be able to shoot. Most of us had never touched a gun before. We tried to march briskly out to the truck, but the rifles weighed quite a bit and somewhat spoilt our appearance. Behind us, we left the men who had heard of this junket all wondering if we would return unwounded. The trucks drove us to, I think, the Connaught Rifle Range,[1] and sergeants instructed us, warning of the backward kick. Did we actually fire more than one bullet? Can't remember but, even at that time, I knew that Ross rifles had been on the way out of use during the Boer War in South Africa in 1900.[2] We had sore shoulders – the kickback seemed vicious to us. Luckily, this comprised all our firearms training. At best, it made an amusing story ...

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[2] The Ross rifle went into production in Canada in 1903, and went through three major design phases ("marks") by 1914. Although it performed well on the range, it never achieved the rugged utility of Britain's .303-calibre Lee-Enfield rifle and, by 1916, it had a terrible reputation with combat troops. It was long (60 ½ inches from butt-plate to bayonet tip) and heavy (9 pounds 14 ounces); it jammed constantly; and it occasionally blew back its bolt. The Ross was withdrawn from front-line units during the summer of 1916 and replaced with the Lee-Enfield. During the Second World War, the Ross Mk III was issued to coastal-defence and training units, the Royal Canadian Navy and the Veteran's Guard of Canada.

Of course, I fell in love with my boss. He must have been twice my age or more, married – but he represented glamour, the essence of the military. Did the other girls react that way at first, at least until we realised that these were men, not divine beings?

Within a few months, another girl, tall, quiet, self-confident and competent, was posted to Vancouver Defences to work as secretary for Major McGuire, the admin officer. She had been his secretary in (I think) Penticton. Kathleen Wilkinson and I felt somehow a bit abashed by this Joan. She was so serious. She had taken basic training, I think, which gave her an advantage, at least morally, over us.

After a relatively short time, Joan's boss and mine had wangled a temporary commission for her and me. How proud we felt with our little pip,[3] how flattered to be considered so good at our work. Some time later, she was sent on OTC and I was posted to HQ Pacific Command to be a cipher officer.

It would have been difficult to find anyone less suited to handle those machines; they were invented by some Pole with a passion for precision and numbers, and everything depended on scrupulous accuracy. Inside the machine was a three-section roller, a sort of cartridge. Each day, each section had to be aligned with the other two in accordance with some code. One then typed in the message to be sent, hoping that things would go well, or typed the incoming message groups, praying the decoded text would make sense. Some people may have enjoyed, been stimulated, by the whole set-up. I wasn't. The girls and I toiled madly, but the possibilities for error were enormous. The work was of surpassing dullness, shut away as we were in a small, locked room that had to be manned around the clock. I remember only too well being on the graveyard shift in Victoria, midnight to 0800. Happily, it was a bit less busy, but rarely less boring.

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[3] The star-shaped badge of a second lieutenant, worn on the shoulder of the uniform tunic.

In Victoria, there was no room for me in living quarters at Work Point where both Pacific Command and the 6th Division were stationed. Luckily, I knew slightly a nice elderly couple who let me sleep in their living room. To Work Point was a pretty walk of some twenty minutes. Even at night, one felt completely safe. I had a bit of a social life and particularly enjoyed dances at the Empress Hotel where we would sing along with the music – *Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition, Bless 'Em All,* Vera Lynn's great success, *The White Cliffs of Dover,* and quite a few from the First World War. Mostly, we danced.

One day, I sallied forth to buy a raincoat to replace the issue one and felt slightly taken aback when several of the Sixth Division officers, in the taxi into which we were crowded, took my lovely new raincoat and scuffed it on the floor so it wouldn't look so ridiculously new, they said, quite lacking in sophistication. I can't say I enjoyed the scruffy look, but I loved wearing the square green Pacific Command arm patch.

Cipher matters came under Signals, a section of MI4.[4] The top brass in the west was Colonel Archie St. Louis, a genial, stocky, red-faced man, highly intelligent, popular and completely in charge of his area. He was already almost mythic, even in Canada, because of the years he had spend in China constructing and managing a telecommunications system for Chiang Kai-shek, leader of the Nationalist forces. Generalissimo Chiang, a brother-in-law of Sun Yat-sen, who had overthrown the monarchy, commanded the army and held sway from the 1930s until the end of the war. He was bitterly opposed to communism and agreed to join the Allies, but had already drawn in experts like St. Louis to reorganise the country's infrastructure. At this time, the Japanese were the obvious enemy because of their invasion of Mongolia. Later, the Nationalist forces were defeated by those of Mao Tse-tung, and Chiang Kai-shek retreated to Taiwan.

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[4] "MI4" stands for Military Intelligence, Fourth Bureau, a designation inherited from the British. A DND activity under the *Defence Of Canada Regulations,* its functions were to gather intelligence and prevent security breaches by reading and, if necessary, censoring documents, both published (e.g., newspapers) and unpublished (e.g., letters). Canada also had an MI9 bureau (intelligence about Allied prisoners of war in enemy hands) and an MI10 bureau (intelligence about enemy prisoners of war in Canadian hands).

Rumour had it that, not only was the Colonel held in great esteem in China, but that his wife, as mother of seven sons, was respected and much sought after. The wives of high-ranking Chinese visited her frequently in hopes that her fertility would rub off on them.

Colonel St. Louis was not only one of the most colourful officers but also one of the nicest. I felt he had given me an award of value when, on Christmas Day, he toured all the offices under his command and approved my being on duty alone, leaving the girls free for as much of the day as possible.

Finally, Pacific Command moved to Vancouver, and all three services – navy, army and air force, were tucked into new, large, temporary buildings, a five- or ten-minute walk from the Jericho Country Club, which had been taken over for the duration. I was the only female officer for some weeks, and was sent for meals to a large, handsome house used as a mess by the local contingent of the air force. I was not one bit welcome, though people were polite. Many years later, I saw the house again, at a time when some community group was using it for various activities for both children and adults. One of the children was my granddaughter.

With the arrival of a couple of WAAFs and, later, another CWAC officer, I affected my entry into Jericho.

Someone had decreed that the staff who ran the club before the war – this included the cooking – should now serve the combined mess. The food was excellent. My first experience with such breakfast delicacies as kedgeree, kidneys and creamed mushrooms on toast were an entry to a new world. And then there was the buffet supper on Sunday nights, with a whole jellied tongue – the jelly almost black – a great roast of beef, and similar pleasures. And for dessert, with delightful frequency, a very large glass bowl of trifle, made with plenty of rum and topped with more than an inch of whipped cream. I've since heard that the best food was usually to be found in the sergeants' mess, but Jericho must have been an exception.

After lunch, we enthusiasts made a beeline for the cribbage boards and tables, and played happily for the remaining time. Sometimes, we had to run to make it back to our offices on time.

One summer day, the Governor General and his wife came to inspect the station and have lunch. He was Major-General the Earl of Athlone, and his wife, Princess Alice, was one of the granddaughters of Queen Victoria. He was in uniform with the scarlet tabs etc., which set off handsomely his white moustache and rows of medal ribbons; a tall, dignified-looking man, the epitome of the British staff officer. He inspected various places, ending with the "map room," or communications centre. As it was set up for the day, and really meant practically nothing, someone had the bright idea of installing me there trying to look busy. It seemed to interest the GG who stayed several minutes longer than scheduled. Then I had to run like mad to the women's mess (which existed for just that day), where all the females had foregathered for sherry before lunch with the Princess. Still out of breath, I made my curtsey and panted, "Please excuse for being late, Ma'am, your husband was so interested in the communications room." Fortunately, no one else heard me, and the Princess was too polite to show surprise at so unsuitable a remark.

The meal has remained in my mind for – figure it out yourself; this was the summer of 1943. We had a whole boned squab each (my only such to date), with fresh green peas and little rounds of boiled potatoes. For dessert, ice cream well-filled with rum-soaked candy peel, quite the most delicious thing and something I couldn't even have imagined.

All this time, I had worn my single pip – the lowliest form of military life, as someone said – but, at the end of August, it was decided to send me to OTC to qualify. I went by train and Major Haweis, by now the Officer Commanding at Ste-Anne-de-Bellevue, was on the same trip. She was most kind to me, but one knew somehow not to presume.

My father said that the eastern dining car on the CPR run from Vancouver to Montreal, the one changed in Winnipeg, had the best meals, so I avoided dinner during the 45 minutes needed for the changeover. Then, to my dismay, the staff told me the next meal would be breakfast the following morning, and why hadn't I eaten before? My explanation, and (doubtless) the uniform, started a bustling, and soon a fine meal was set before me with three or four friendly men asking about the army for women and the conditions in the west. For dessert, they tempted me to try raw blueberries with cream and professed astonishment when I said I'd eaten blueberries only cooked. Insisting that raw was far better, they served a generous bowlful and converted me on the spot.

Ste-Anne-de-Bellevue has such a beautiful setting, and the campus, the forestry part of McGill University, was reputed to be the handsomest in Canada. The elegant buildings, mostly of mellow, pinkish brick, were set on the well-treed grounds, and the little village (as it was then) had its own charm. Having never seen anything of Quebec, but disposed to enjoy it because my father had lived in and loved Montreal as a young man, I fell easily under the spell of French Canada. Some fifty-five years later, this charm still delights me, the advantage being that now I know a lot of French Canadians, can speak the language reasonably well and, despite a passion for the Rockies, would be desolated to live in a one-language part of the world. Even though my current home lies in an Irish enclave with fine people, the richness and charm of French Canada enthrals me still. It all started at Ste-Anne ...

As usual for recruits and cadets, after a bit of certain wariness we got along pretty well. We cadets came from all over Canada and even one from Poland. Halina was in the Free Polish Army but made no fuss about it. She spoke little about her experiences and didn't complain, but her devotion to her country's cause burned like a flame.

After so many years, only a few names remain in my memory. A cadet from Edmonton, Shirley Weir, was a journalist on her way to becoming a war correspondent. One of the young officers who assisted in our training was called Caine, always known as Candy. The messing officer, Captain Helen Abel, was a dietician and had, I think, taught home economics. She did a splendid job with army rations and somehow managed to render any fat so she could produce cakes, even sugar tarts once or twice. Two of the cadets had come from a posting to Washington where, they said, they were issued with salt tablets in the summer, warned to drink as much liquid as they could, and still found it necessary to change their shirts several times daily. They, like so many others, were of the finest quality, intelligent, competent, not pushy, always willing to help anyone.

One of the first things we learned was to run up two flights of stairs, change our clothing, leave our area tidy, race down and be ready for the next item of training in five minutes. For a couple of weeks most of us panted like tired dogs, but we weren't ever late. And soon our physical condition improved until the stairs meant nothing.

We had the most glorious autumn I remember; in British Columbia I had kept memories of the vivid autumn colours of Alberta and looked forward to seeing them again. But September 1943 produced amber, bronze, copper, dull golds, all so breath-taking that drill outside became an experience to relish. Another charm was the presence of a few Quebec cadets who delighted us by singing *Madelon* and other swingy French tunes that helped make route marches a pleasure. The two names that remain in my mind were those of Madeleine Frémont, descendant of one of the most respected French families, and Corinne (known as Clou) Kernan, granddaughter of a former lieutenant-governor of Quebec; she later married Pierre Sévigny, who was to become a federal cabinet minister.

The subjects we were taught were of varied interest and appeal. None of us liked the *Army Act* and the need to have a pretty good knowledge of it. The only section – No. 40, is it? – that remains in my mind now is "Conduct unbecoming an officer" – or is it "prejudicial to good order and discipline"? We liked drill, and gasped and sputtered through our introduction to gas masks as protection against tear gas; the teachers made sure we had a good whiff of that so the value of the mask would be unquestioned.

Psychology had invaded the army, and we were taught the need to understand, to know our girls. The value of this to their work was not emphasised so much as it would be now, but the importance of being aware of their emotional well being was stressed. We learned something about map-reading but my memory has let slip any other subjects. Except, of course, how to clean the shower rooms, keep our possessions neat and compact, and our beds perfectly made. In retrospect, I feel the course was well planned on the whole, and that the friendship and good feelings among the cadets was of value in more than a purely service life.

Our favourite little restaurant, the Cozy Corner, was near the campus, and most of us went there from time to time for a cup of coffee, sometimes even a meal.

As I write, a memory returns for the first time in decades. The day before we arrived in Sainte-Anne there had been a fire at a nearby military hospital. Next morning, we were taken over to help mop and generally clean up. The men found it quite diverting. And we, of course, felt useful and glad to do some little thing to help, especially as the work had been physically hard and we were pretty dirty afterward.

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5 The place referred to here is No. 2 Service Flying Training School at what is now Macdonald-Cartier International Airport, in Ottawa. Built late in 1939, No. 2 SFTS was one of the first flying schools opened under the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan; its "relief fields" (airstrips where pupils could land if the home field was not available), at the nearby villages of Edwards, Metcalfe and Carp also still exist, as community airports. No. 2 SFTS taught basic fighter-pilot skills in the Harvard, a single-engine trainer built by North American Aviation.

One glorious day I had leave, heaven knows why or how, and took the train to Ottawa in company with a male sergeant who taught us drill. We hied ourselves to a nearby air force training establishment. Most of the details have faded now, all except the thrill of being outfitted in flying garments – the boots were so big that they slewed to left or right when I walked, however hard I tried to keep them pointing straight ahead. *And there was a packed parachute on my back.* The place was a training station,[5] the planes being Harvards with a top cruising speed of 80 miles per hour. Propellers, naturally; I'd never even heard of jets in 1943. The pilot, exuberant and passionate about flying, let me do barrel rolls, somersaults, fly upside down. My insides wobbled a bit but hung on. In the afternoon he let me hedgehop, and no greater thrill ever came my way. We practised landings – bumpy of course – and then the crowning touch, he let me swoop down and chase some inoffensive cows in a field. We can't have been much more than 20 feet from the ground. Later the realisation swam in; that's no way to treat cows. But the thrill of swinging and diving ... There's a poem by John Gillespie Magee that expresses the up-rush of pure joy, of freedom, of escape from, as he puts it "the surly bonds of earth."[6] As I looked down, the earth below seemed to be part of a half-forgotten existence, long past.

I had various postings, all in Ottawa, and all fell into office category. First was in No. 8 Temporary Building out at Dow's Lake. Long since demolished along with the two others there and replaced by parkland, it housed the censorship offices, mostly civilian but with small sub-sections for the three services. Mine was concerned with the incoming letters from men in prisoner of war camps. We had to note anything that might have been missed by the civilian readers, whatever we considered possibly of some bit of use to the great ones at MI4 who were said to be piecing together the tiny bits of information to create a picture. Most of the censors were civilian and we got along pretty well together.

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6 *High Flight*, by John Gillespie Magee. Magee was an American who came to Canada to join the RCAF before Pearl Harbor; he was killed in an air crash.

The head of our little group was Polish, a Major Wygard who was rather a martinet. Then came his assistant, a CWAC captain, very English-Canadian. A small, dignified woman who had travelled a lot, was cultured in a way I had only read about; she was called Bunny, surname forgotten. The group also included a young man from Luxembourg (several languages) called Jan, and Ben, a middle-aged Russian Jew (also languages), kindness and gentleness being his legacy to me – that, and a detailed drawing of a still for making alcohol from wine or fruit juice, which I finally discarded only a few years ago. And Molly from the Netherlands, also in command of several languages, a complex and delightful person. All interesting, able people.

A strange, utterly useless bit of information that has stuck in my memory came from Molly, who said she had it from Jan. On the back page of daily newspapers in his part of Europe – remember the date, the early 1940s – if one checked to see who had been received in audience by the sovereign, one could learn a lot about current political trends. To a Canadian, all very Graustark or Zenda.

Still not accommodated in barracks, I found a room fairly close to Dow's Lake. Having no friends nearby, I began taking a streetcar downtown after work, eating mostly in the cafeteria on the lowest floor of the Chateau Laurier. It provided good food, a lively, cheerful atmosphere and, it seemed, patrons from most of the Allied countries. I remember being impressed by the Russians, who looked immensely tall and dashing in their long greatcoats. They were always in pairs and paid no attention to anyone else. A Polish chap had a name that took a good deal of practising – he was Tereschenko-Podbereski and, according to his story, was one of the last to leave Warsaw before the Nazis rolled in. Lots of charm. I disapproved of the casual way he spoke of his escape, leaving behind his wife. Quite a number of British could be seen from time to time, but they tended to keep to themselves.

The most noticeable group was a cheerful, somewhat rakish lot who worked in what was known then as the John Street Rabbit Warren, which was the early home of the National Film Board. One of them wore orange trousers, a visual shock then. Another sported a rather straggly carroty-red beard that drifted its wispiness over a bright purple knitted silk tie. He was a still photographer named MacKenzie Dubé. When I came to know him and asked why he wore the tie, he replied cheerfully that it made people notice him, which was good for business. His photographs of Suzanne Cloutier, the unusually beautiful daughter of the King's Printer, started that young woman on her road to films. She later acted with Orson Welles and Peter Ustinov.

Now long since demolished, the John Street Rabbit Warren was a row of little attached houses connected by doors cut through the party walls. Located on the south-east corner of John Street and Sussex Drive, it was opposite the magnificent French Embassy. That handsome building, completed just before the war, was looked after by a skeleton staff under a man called Alaterre. He was the acting French Consul and had an office somewhere manned by quite a crew – Naomi, a Canadian female who hailed from Calgary, and a dark, intense chap from McGill, Douglas, pronounced "Dooglas." (Was that his given or surname?) Both spoke excellent French. There was also a slight, quiet Frenchwoman, Blanche Boette, who shared an apartment with Naomi. They seemed to be the heart of the intellectual, French-speaking, group of regular cafeteria patrons.

One often saw them with two or three tables dragged together, talking and laughing, the gayest and most exuberant group in the room. By a stroke of luck, I became included in this group, which varied in composition from time to time. Another member was Jean-Louis Delisle, an assistant to Jack Pickersgill (then secretary to the Prime Minister MacKenzie King). He was a young, slim, dark, amusing chap from Quebec City. Others, more or less regular, were Jean-Thomas Larochelle, small, quiet, gentle. His work was never mentioned. Arthur Dubé, studying for his doctorate at Ottawa University, was a distant cousin of MacKenzie; he was so poor that he had only one tie and his sole pair of shoes turned up at the toes. He had great exuberance, a mop of dark curly hair, and few social inhibitions. He both startled and delighted me by singing one evening, full voice, *Panis Angelicus*.

His high spirits must have delighted anyone else walking along Wellington Street that evening. After the war, his career took him to the post of professor of metallurgy at Laval University.

Pierre Taschereau also showed up from time to time. I've forgotten his job then, but he became one of the top lawyers for the CPR in Montreal. He married Yseult Taschereau, one of the daughters of Laurent Taschereau, the Assistant Minister of External Affairs. Marius Barbeau's daughter Dalilah turned up occasionally with her future husband, Art Price, later a Hollywood luminary. Marguerite Wilson, a tiny Frenchwoman from Madagascar, had an indefinable authority mixed with her *chic.* More imposing was Irene Arnould, a half-Polish, half-French woman from the Wartime Information Board. And there was a newspaperman from the Parliamentary Press Gallery, cheerful, witty, amusing and nice. I married him a year or so later.

Frequent encounters with this group made up for the relative dullness of my room and my job.

Eventually, the authorities shunted me from censorship to Operational Research in some hastily erected quarters at the south end of Cartier Street, abutting on what became the Lycée Claudel, a French school used mainly by diplomatic families because the French curriculum could be found on almost every posting, which ensured a relatively coherent system of schooling for their children.

Our offices were gaily decorated with snuff-brown linoleum. Maybe it was felt that this wouldn't show dust and dirt. It did. But the office contained a varied, unusual and highly interesting group. The civilian head was Dr. Donald Rose, a quiet, soft-spoken, always-courteous scientist from NRC; his military counterpart, and my direct boss, was Colonel John Tuzo Wilson, formerly a professor at the University of Toronto and, after the war, head of the university's new department of geophysics for more than twenty years. Colonel Wilson was a large, hearty, enthusiastic, cheerful man, full of energy and drive, given to bursts of laughter.

The second-in-command was Lieutenant-Colonel Sanders (or Sandison?), formerly in the army in India. Presumably that was where he learned Sanskrit, in which language he was said to write a sort of diary that he locked up in a private safe in his office. The diary held his candid opinion of both the personalities and events in the office. He was a slight, sandy-haired figure with an odd sense of humour. I regret the shyness that kept me from getting to know him better, not that there could have been anything in a junior officer to attract a mind like his. He too, he was from Toronto, or at least had a home there at the time.

The office manager, Major Lloyd Hunter, was a capable, pleasant-looking, grey-haired man who had lost one arm. He used to fascinate us with stories of his experiences in England when he was billeted there early in the war. Of the two that impressed me most, one concerned how the drainpipes were attached to the outside walls of houses; when the Canadians asked why, the pitying Brits explained that it was easier to thaw them out when they were frozen. The other story described the amazement Canadians felt when seeing the lady in whose home they lived grasp the stem of a whole cauliflower and place it in boiling water, whence she retrieved it an hour later, holding it while the water poured out of the poor thing. Major Hunter ended with the comment that, before they left he and the other Canadians had taught her how to cook vegetables instead of boiling them to bits, and even to make decent pastry.

There were a couple of other young army officers, and a man who did various things. We called him Huck, and all took considerable interest in the way he set about curing a bearskin to the right degree for tanning by soaking it in brine. Huck hailed from the Cariboo district of northern British Columbia and had been a trapper, I think. We understood that a friend there had sent the skin to him for curing and tanning. There were also a few navy officers with whom we had little to do. And there was a CWAC captain, Jean MacLennan from British Columbia, an unusual, capable, rather moody person, who, as it turned out much later, had many troubles in her background. They didn't interfere with her work at all.

We had a huge safe in which secret documents were kept. While not forbidden to look at anything, we were specifically told to refrain from talking about any of the projects carried out by other branches of MI4. Having the combination to the safe was pretty impressive and flattering.

Our work was varied, the most valuable being the Arctic exercises that introduced the first snowmobiles and modified them for real use. Cold Lake was one of the sites for training and exercises. One of these exercises involved soldiers in white clothing, trained in skiing like the Norwegians and Finns. A couple of men who played considerable roles were Graham Rowley, an Englishman who became one of the founders of the Arctic Institute, and Colonel Pat Baird, another enthusiast of the north. When the considerable complexities of arranging the logistics of these Arctic exercises had been settled, and everyone had taken off except Lieutenant-Colonel Sanders and Major Hunter, our attention turned to maps of Canada and the northern USA, on which we marked all the sites where some mysterious Japanese balloons had come to earth. No one then knew their purpose but, some years later, it was learned that they were no more dangerous or threatening than a way of learning about weather conditions in upper levels of the atmosphere. At the time, it was hush-hush, with imaginations trying to figure why they were doing what.

The Arctic exercises led eventually to a considerable development of Canada's interest in the north, in which the Arctic Institute played a notable role.

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7 The Allied forces used a great variety of "phonetic" alphabets to facilitate clear radio transmission of spelled-out words and call signs. British forces used at least five during the Second World War – the Royal Navy one, for example, began "apples, beer." "Ack emma" (a.m.) belongs to the earliest such alphabet, developed by the Royal Corps of Signals during the First World War.

It was during these months that the Americans put pressure on everyone else to adopt their ways, such as "Top" instead of "Most" Secret, and we had to change to their way of spelling aloud. We had used the British method, and were forced to switch to "able, baker" – by now I've forgotten the old way, except that for "a.m." we had been using "ack emma."[7] It was confusing for a while.

Then the war in Europe ended and, a few months later, the Far East theatre fell silent. We still had projects to finish but, when a captaincy was offered me, I elected to return to civilian life, having married. At the end of January 1946, my last posting was to Kingston, Ontario, for demobilisation.

Four and a half years. They taught me a lot and left fine memories, on the whole. Certainly, I've never regretted the times. As for the D-Day celebrations in Ottawa, having hated and feared large crowds since childhood, I watched from the sidewalk as cars drove slowly along, heavily laden with shouting and shrieking men and women throwing paper to express their joy.

Jeanne Bouchard

I was the second child of a rural family of seven children, born October 1922 in the Gaspe region of the province of Quebec. When I was ten years old, my father died after a short illness, and this tragedy was relived three years later when my mother also passed away. As a result, most of my siblings and myself were put under the care of a religious order. From the orphanage, I was sent to work, for room and board, in a private home in the City of Quebec.

One day, I came across an article in local newspaper advertising for the recruitment of women in the Canadian Armed Forces. It said: "Join the Army." I remember thinking: here's my chance! This was a Wednesday or Thursday. It was also the turning point in my life. Without discussing it with my employer, I took down the address and on the designated day, the following Saturday, I made my way to the recruitment office. Once there, I was interviewed by an army sergeant and told him my personal situation. I remember vividly telling him that I had nothing to bring into the service...in fact I had barely anything but the clothes on my back! His words to me were like a gift from heaven. He told me that if I was willing to work hard, study hard and be dedicated, I could have a very fulfilling and interesting career in the Canadian Forces. He said that I would be trained, clothed, lodged and nourished. He also told me that I would have to report the following day, Sunday, by eight o'clock in the evening. I was nineteen years old and I was the 124th woman to sign up in District No. 5, Quebec City region, all the way up the Gaspe coast.

Upon my return to the private residence of my employment, I waited until the evening when I knew the gentleman of the house would be alone and working quietly in his study. I tapped on his door and asked if I could speak with him. I proceeded to tell him of my decision and announced I would be leaving after supper the following evening. I also needed his signature as my guardian to sign up. I will never forget how he looked at me. After a moment's thought, he said that I had made the right choice! He wished me luck and said that I should work hard and have a good life. His words echoed those of my dearly departed father who had always told me that if you work hard in life, you will succeed and that all just work deserves just pay.

With these words of encouragement, I went back to my room and packed the few pieces of hand-me-down clothes and shoes I owned. During the evening meal, the gentleman of the house announced to the family that I was leaving. Of course I had all the children's questions to answer and was very proud to say I was joining the Canadian Armed Forces and I was going to serve my country. After serving supper and cleaning up, I made my way to my new life. That was the turning point in my life: it was something I had to do. I had no family. I would become a CWAC (Canadian Women's Army Corps) and the forces would and did become my family. So much so, that I remember time and time again giving my leave passes to some of the other girls who were homesick and wanted to go visit their families. I finally felt that I belonged. This was my home. I have always held my head high and have always been very proud of my contribution to the CF.

I will never forget how I felt when I was leaving after being given my uniform: shirts, shoes, hat...I was now somebody. I had a name and a number. I belonged. I no longer was an orphan, a reject from society. I could go forward. Study, learn, make a life for myself. When my grandfather first saw me in uniform, he took me in his arms and said "My Jeannot, this is the best gift you could have given me. I am so proud of you. Never mind the others, make a life for yourself. Study hard. Work hard and be happy".

For the first fifteen days in barracks, because there were not enough women to send to training, we were tasked to do different jobs. I was asked if I could read and count properly. I said that I could, so I was sent to work in Cove Field, which was just behind the Armories. The Cove Field was a series of huts originally constructed on the battlefield and used to house German prisoners of war during the Second World War. These prisoners came to Canada from England. They were German civilians who had fled Germany in 1935 and when war was declared in 1939, the British said these people were Germans and in order to prevent spying, they were put on ships and sent to Canada. Upon their arrival in Quebec City, they were lodged at Cove Field, located on the Plains of Abraham in the old historic capital. During that period, 35,000 such POW's were sent to Canada and were relocated, to places like Joliette, l'Isle Ste Helene, in Montréal and various other places. Cove Field also served as a military camp around 1941. Documentation and clothing for newly recruited members was also done there, since the Citadel had become too cramped. I worked in this recruitment office under Lieutenant Col. Forbes for about eight or ten days. I remember being tasked to work in the Officers' Mess for a short while, and vividly recall being very intimidated

One night while we were on parade, I remember being told that we were finally going to basic training in Ste-Anne-de-Bellevue. That lasted approximately six weeks, if my memory serves me right. I have very pleasant memories of that period in my life-during our basic training-when we would all go dancing in Montréal. There was a place on Ontario Street where military women could stay for fifty cents a night. Our curfew was one o'clock in the morning. It was quite a distance between the dance hall and where we stayed. Not having much money, I can tell you that sometimes, the rush was on to get back in time. Of course, we only wore military clothes. We were not allowed to be seen in civilian clothes during the war, even if we were on leave. We would have been charged. But the rules were the same for everyone. You were not allowed to wear make-up or jewellery either, although some women wore a tiny bit, especially to go dancing! I had very dark hair, eyelashes and eyebrows. One day, while we were on parade, I was told to go wash my face: but I was not wearing any make-up! We couldn't even own a pair of stockings that were not part of the uniform. Not even a facecloth or towel. Our personal hygienic products were purchased at the local YMCA. Our hair had to be either worn short, or tied up. To get it cut was 35 cents.

Upon my return to Québec City, I took a driver's training course and was assigned to work in rations. In order to do so, I needed to take yet another six-week course as War Manager. We learned that we had so many units, each unit was allowed to have a certain ration of butter, milk, etc. I was asked if I spoke English, and replied that I did, in fact I had taken an intensive English immersion course in Long Branch, near Toronto for about six weeks, in order to improve my English. I had every intention of using and perfecting my second language. During that course, we also had to learn how to type. Those courses were short in duration and very intense. The country was at war and short of personnel. My supervisor, Staff-sergeant Doré and Captain Warner told me that we would set up a ledger for the control of rations, since the existing system was inadequate. We purchased the necessary material and proceeded with the work at hand. I was now a Lance Corporal in Supply. In July of 1943, I was scheduled to go on vacation, but was told that my leave had been cancelled. I had been selected by Captain Marie Desrivieres along with about a dozen others to work at the Citadelle during the Allied Conference. Dignitaries and world leaders in attendance on the Plains of Abraham were Canadian Prime Minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King, American President Franklin D. Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill, Lord Mountbatten, Mr. Anthony Eden, to name but a few, plus a multitude of military, RCMP and diplomats. The conference was to last twenty days.

While working on the Citadel during the Québec City Allied Conference of 1943, we did the work assigned to us: no questions asked. Major discussions and decisions were being made that affected the outcome of the war. We were tasked to carry secret documents, messages and correspondence between the key players, always under the escort of the RCMP, who were entrusted with national security, espionage and counter espionage activity at that time.

The CWAC's slept and had their meals at the Citadel in a building located south east of the parade square. One day, after the arrival of the British Prime Minister, Sir Winston Churchill, Lady Churchill and their daughter, Lieutenant Mary Churchill, I was rushed over to the Governor General's residence, which the Churchill family occupied. To place things in proper perspective, all military personnel faced a very important hierarchy, ranging the full gamut of sixteen ranks, who's authority was democratically derived directly from Cabinet, accountable to the Canadian population. To find yourself face to face with Sir Winston Churchill, who at that moment in history, had almost unlimited powers, being at the top of the hierarchy, and given the special war measures; a man who at any given time could promote or demote serving military personnel, anywhere in the Commonwealth, was to say the least, very intimidating. Fully realizing the important person I was about to meet, I entered the large office, saluted, stood at attention and waited to hear what words "HE" would say. The wait was not very long. He looked at me, and probably realizing my nervousness, told me to stand at ease and said: "Take it easy, girl, take it easy." He then asked me what my name was. Upon hearing my accent, he asked me if I was French Canadian. I replied politely, at which point, Lady Churchill said to me "bonjour mademoiselle", and proceeded to carry a conversation with me in perfect french. Mr. Churchill understood everything we were saying, but spoke english to us. Within a few minutes, I was given a very important document, so I gathered, saluted and was escorted out of the room by a RCMP officer in scarlet uniform. If I remember well, his name was Sergeant Jimmie Gray, from Ottawa. We were led to an awaiting Jeep, identified for the use of the British prime minister's staff, and proceeded to deliver the document to its' designation.

President Roosevelt had brought with him at the conference, his faithful companion, a dog by the name of "Follow". One day, while we were standing at attention on the parade square, very close to the ramparts, Sir Winston, Mr. Roosevelt and the other dignitaries were standing and sitting at a not too far distance. Suddenly, the poor dog, not being in his environment, became quite exited and started running directly towards the ramparts. Everyone present sensed the danger! Should the dog fall off those famous cliffs, how could he ever be retrieved, should he even survive? Having just that very instant been given the "Dismissed" signal, and being the animal lover that I have always been, I instinctively ran towards the dog and called him. The hyper little pooch turned around and started running towards me, jumping into my open arms! He was only too happy to finally get some attention. While cuddling him closely to guarantee his safety, I heard president Roosevelt call me. I walked over to where the frail president's wheelchair was and handed Follow over to him. He gave me a handshake and said, in English: "Thank you for saving my dog!" As I was walking the dog to the president, a photographer snapped a picture of me with the presidential pooch in arm. What a souvenir that is. In fact, years later, some of the vets were being entertained at the American embassy and the speaker made a comment to the effect that the successful outcome of the war was greatly due to the fact that M^{me} Bouchard had saved the life of Mr. Roosevelt's dog! My posting at the Allied Conference lasted about one month, at the end of which I took a bit of leave before returning to my unit and back to Supply, and rations.

In those days, women in the forces did mostly clerical work. Men occupied the higher ranks, in most cases. I never complained. I was very happy with my job and salary. That's just the way it was. Staff Sergeant Doré and Captain Warner were very nice men. One day, I was called into the office and told that an officer was coming in, but that I would go before a board and get trades pay, which was an extra 90 cents a day. The new person coming in would out-rank me, but I was told that because I was doing the work so well, and would have to train that person, I would get the extra trade's pay. That suited me just fine. I was happy and stayed in rations for awhile. I took as many courses as I could in the evening as well. Courses in accounting, etc. I knew what courses I needed and studied during my free time or whenever I could.

Eventually, when the war ended and camps were closing, I was transferred to the Paymaster's Office, where I remained until my own discharge in 1946. We were very busy, doing the men's pay and orders upon their coming back to Canada from overseas. They were all anxious to get home. I worked with Captain Dery. We would work until about six o'clock, have supper and return to work until about ten o'clock at night. The camp had between 1200 and 1500 men and when we knew a ship was coming in, and the train would be pulling into the station, we knew we had to rush to release those soldiers. They could not leave camp without their orders. Of course, we had no computers; everything was done using typewriters. The atmosphere was electric. It was a very exiting time. My friend Mr. Ouellette, who had been reported missing in action, spent nine months as a prisoner of war in Germany. When he was finally located, a second telegram was sent to his family and upon his arrival in Halifax, he boarded a train bound for Lévis, Quebec, directly across from the Citadel at Québec City. At the station, he was met by his entire family, and was given a thirty days leave pass. After his well deserved time off, he, like other servicemen being released, had to report to Cove Field and then to Lauzon Camp The proper documentation was prepared by my section, the Paymaster, and within three days they were released. No psychologists or doctors were available in those days, not even for the POWs. The servicemen had a meeting with the PSO, who gave them a bit of an orientation on the job market in the civilian world, etc.

I remember meeting one of my old friends whom was returning from overseas. He said to me: "Hey Jeanne...what are you doing here" Look at me, I lost a leg, but not both!" About that time, I was corresponding with a good friend of mine who was serving overseas. If a man signed up voluntarily, only then could he be sent overseas. He had signed up, half way through university, because he said he wanted to get the military experience and would finish his education upon his return after the war. This boy had about a thirty-year life plan ahead of him. It was not to be. He was killed overseas. The news of their son's death was almost unbearable for the father: he died shortly after. That poor woman never recovered from losing her only child, and then her husband. It was so sad. My friend was so young, in the prime of his life. And yet, he was taken from us. But for the grace of God. I kept visiting that woman right up until she passed away: even after I got married. I will never forget them.

I was not looking forward to civilian life. I had no family to go home to. I was one of the last to be discharged. I remember Captain Desrivieres, with whom I had formed a close friendship, taking me into her office and telling me that the time had come for us to part ways. She said to me "dismissed" and she asked me what my plans were in the civilian world. I told her that I was not interested in the civilian life and would like to have a military career. I believed that my experience and the fact that I was bilingual and single should have qualified me for a promotion. I could not imagine facing civilian life. I was facing an uphill struggle. The army had truly become my family. I had no parents. My siblings were younger then I was, and by this time, each had made a life for themselves, as best they could. I had nothing. I wanted a military career, but I was told that women's corps in Quebec was being closed. I was to be discharged. This was in July of 1945. I was so unhappy. After being interviewed by the unemployment office, I began to work there. Needless to say, I did not enjoy my job at all. I was used to wearing a uniform. I hated to have to buy civilian clothes. I would cry every morning and just couldn't believe that I had to go to work there. I wanted to be back in the army. I could not adapt to civilian life...I missed my friends, the camaraderie, the environment, the rank structure, the dedication. I missed my military family. The way I look at it, without the army, I was nothing. For a little orphan girl, who remembered living in a loving home, having had the normal comforts and support of a family, I even had my own horse...to find herself completely alone...no wonder the army was my family...that is all I knew and had. It was my life. I just could not adapt to civilian life. This was the darkest period of my life. I was so proud to be a CWAC. All that was about to change.

When I was released from the service, there was no support to ease you back into civilian life...no one to give advice or help. I truly felt alone. I despised my job at the unemployment office. Finally, one day I was walking on St. Joseph Street and saw a sign in a store window that read "Clerk Wanted". I walked in, applied and got the job. Thus began a long life of serving the public, eventually becoming manager and buyer.

I also remember having to shop for civilian clothes. I did not enjoy it. In fact, the first thing I bought upon my release was a pearl necklace and earrings. The second thing was a green woollen dress. I also bought my first fur coat.

After a period of time, my social life improved when I started going out with a group of airforce people I had met during my career. I then met and married my husband Georges Guimond, who was in the airforce. We always circulated in military circles. Even after his death, some thirty-two years ago, I kept contact with my old military friends. I am an active member of the Royal Canadian Legion, still today. I do a great deal of voluntary work with the Legion for the veterans. I also do voluntary work for the Red Cross and visit vets in the hospital and hospices in the Québec City region. At least once a year, I attend a CWAC reunion and keep the friendship ties with ex-military women from Ontario and Quebec. I have had a fulfilling life. I have worked hard, done some very interesting things; I even went to study chocolate making in Paris, France.

Military life for women in the forties was very different then what it is today. The women had to be single. If you wanted to get married, you had to resign. There were no women at Valcartier at all. All were at the Connaught Barracks, and later in temporary barracks call the Jeanne D'Arc barracks, very near the present site of the statue of Jeanne D'Arc (Joan of Arc) at the Citadel in Québec City. Service women did not receive any special medical attention. We had the same care and needle injections as the men did. It happened that certain girls became pregnant, in which case they quietly left the service. I remember one lady being in that situation, and being invited to attend their private wedding ceremony in front of the Padre, since her fiancée was also a serviceman. The Canadian Forces also had a wonderful Army Show that toured Great Britain during the war. Several of the performers were very talented women.

Sometimes I look back at the life I have had and wonder what would have happened to me, had I not signed up in the army. My life today is so complete because of it. I am always welcomed at the Legion, the Red Cross, the Voltigeurs, and the Royal 22nd Regiment.... I can't imagine my life without being a CWAC. It was such a wonderful experience. What a great start to your adult life. It certainly helped set values and priorities that have stayed with me throughout my life. I have been blessed and I am greatly honoured to have served my country. My only regret is that I did not have a military career after the war. Even today, my only child Bernard, still says the army is "Maman's army". That's how it was and that's how it is.

Mary Wallace Whatley

When Canada declared war on Germany, I was fifteen and living at home on my father's dairy farm in the eastern townships of Quebec – near the small sawmill town of Kingsbury, and close to the flying training school at Windsor Mills. My eldest brother Herbie said he would join up when he was old enough, because he knew what the Germans were doing to the Jews was so terribly wrong. I was frightened; and when he joined the Royal Rifles of Canada less than a year later, I felt as if I'd been stabbed in the chest.

That summer, I too left home to work with my older sister in Sherbrooke. When Hong Kong fell, all the family except Herbie was home for Christmas. We all felt he was still alive, though there had been no news of him since he left for Hong Kong. My sister suggested that she and I enlist in the recently formed Women's Division of the RCAF. She was of age to join in January 1942, but I was only seventeen. So in the spring, I went to join my other older brother, Herbie's twin Harry, working at MacDonald Chemicals in Waterloo. There was no opening in the office, so I started work inspecting starters for the colourful flares the factory made.

There was gunpowder everywhere at the plant, and always the danger of an explosion. While I was there, a section of the plant blew up and killed several men, including two I knew. After that I returned to Sherbrooke to do war work at Ingersol Rand – which made compressors and mining equipment, and during the war made shells for the military. I started in Inspection and then changed to Ledgers, keeping records for the inspection department.

In the meantime, the RCAF had lowered its age limit; so when they began to recruit in Sherbrooke in the summer of 1942, I took a day off work to enlist. I had an IQ test, a medical and a driver's test, since I wanted to be in motor transport. I was accepted and sworn in at Montreal three weeks later. From Montreal our small group went by train to Ottawa, where we were met by a WD driving a motor transport panel. When we arrived at Rockcliffe the guard asked her what she was carrying, and her reply was "bags and baggage." I felt very indignant about this!

At that time, No. 7 Manning Depot was newly constructed and the grounds were a muddy mess, with boardwalks to many of the buildings. It was late at night when we arrived, and our barracks looked depressing: bright yellow walls, woodwork and lockers painted dark brown, green roller blinds on all the windows and no curtains. Our bunk beds were brown metal, and had horrible-looking grey blankets with a black stripe down the centre. But we didn't have time to moan and groan, or even have a nice hot drink; we just pushed our suitcases under the bunks and went to bed.

During basic training at Rockcliffe I had one very close friend, Helen Burns. She was from Halifax, had worked for the RCAF, and I think she and I were the only eighteen-year-olds in our Montreal group. We stuck together all through basic – she took the upper bunk and I had the lower. But then she was posted to Halifax, so we were separated.

After basic training, I was posted to Trenton for an equipment assistant's course. I became friends with Doris Reno (known as Dodo) from

Montreal. We went everywhere together on the station and studied together at the 'Y' house down the road. She was a dear friend too.

While I was at Trenton, in the fall of 1942 we heard that my brother Herbie had been captured by the Japanese. We had very little news from him while he was a prisoner of war. Once a lady from British Columbia wrote to my mother that she had heard my brother on the radio: he said he was in a Red Cross hospital and was okay. Once, we were allowed to send him a letter: just ten typewritten words. That was a difficult letter to write – there was so much I wanted to say, and couldn't. We could only hope for the best.

Something else happened at Trenton that had far-reaching effects: I had a bad fall on the ice that caused me some partial memory loss for many years. Two airmen made a stretcher from their greatcoats and carried me to the hospital, where they gave me some shots and pills and strapped me down to keep me flat on my back. I was out like a light. And when I was discharged later that evening, I couldn't find my way out of the hospital. After I'd asked for directions three times from the same nurse, she showed me out.

It astounds me now that no one had told me to return to the hospital if I became confused – I don't think they knew much about concussion in those days. Outdoors, I wandered back and forth in front of the hospital in a heavy snowstorm until an MP returned me to my barracks. I walked in the wrong door and didn't recognize any of the girls getting ready for bed. I just stood there stupefied until someone said, "You must belong in the next room."

I found an empty bunk, and thought I recognized the girl in the upper bunk. She told me she was Mabel, and asked, "Don't you recognize me? You met me your first night here." I tried to ask where my friend was but couldn't remember Dodo's name. Mabel realized that I was having a memory problem, and said, "Your friend Dodo has gone out for the evening." She asked about my fall. Then the call came for "lights out," so I left to prepare for bed.

This memory problem went on for quite some time: I would receive mail and wouldn't recognize half the people who wrote. The most terrible thing about it was that I even didn't recognize Luis Perez-Gomez, a handsome student pilot from Mexico I had met at an air force dance. We fell in love, and he wanted me to marry him at Christmas. But after my accident, I didn't recognize him although he called every night. I spoke to him and told him I couldn't marry him because I had no idea who he was. (As well, I didn't want to be discharged because my joining up was part of our family effort to bring my brother home from Japan.)

Shortly after that, Dodo and I went into Belleville to have my photo taken; and in the studio was a photo of an RCAF pilot with Mexican flashes. I stood staring at this photo, but didn't recognize it as Luis – I just knew I loved him very much. I told Dodo I felt I knew him, and asked if we had met him. She ran away crying. When I caught up with her, she said, "I don't know what's happening here." I couldn't understand why she was so upset. But after that, I kept wanting to find a certain park – though I didn't remember that was where Luis and I had sat and talked after we left the dance on our first evening together, making wonderful plans which never materialized. That park would haunt my dreams for years.

My buried memories of Luis continued to haunt me too. After Christmas we finished our course, got our postings and were given leave to go home for New Year. As our busload of WDs rushed toward the waiting train, someone called to us that this wasn't our train – it was "waiting for a busload of pilots from Belleville." Those words stopped me in my tracks: I had last heard them at the dance where I met Luis. As the Toronto train pulled out, I felt I should be on it – I thought that if I could go back to Belleville and find that park, my mind would clear of all the confusion.

Dodo reminded me that we were going on leave and I was posted to Rockcliffe; but I refused to get on our train, so they had to leave me behind. It took me until late at night – and a trip on the Royal Train going to Ottawa! – before I made it first to Montréal and then to

Richmond, Quebec, where my father met me. I stayed at home over New Year, then returned to Rockcliffe.

What I went through was so sad. Luis tried in many ways to get in touch with me – even doing stunts in his Hurricane over Rockcliffe base in the summer of 1943! – but I didn't know who he was. In 1951, while visiting relatives in Kingston, I asked to be taken to Belleville, as I wanted to find the park. But I couldn't explain why this was so important to me, so we didn't go. I was still dreaming about this park, and Belleville, in the 1960s and 1970s.

Many things happened over the years that would puzzle and haunt me; but my memory of Luis didn't return until 1997, when I turned a page in the air force magazine and saw a photo of him in his officer's uniform. Right away, I recognized him and said his name: "Oh, Luis, Luis! I loved you so much." I realized I had forgotten him all those years and felt horrible, as if I had been robbed. It took over a year to recover from the shock, and I have been remembering him ever since. I would never have imagined that love at first sight would leave such an impression on my life.

After I read the magazine story, I wrote to the author and we corresponded. I discovered that Luis was the only Mexican serving in the RCAF who was killed during the war. He was a fighter pilot, and was shot down on June 16, shortly after the D-Day invasion. He is buried in a little church cemetery in France, where his family chose to have him left. I've received a few pictures of him, his squadron and his grave. I'll never forget him again.

My first job at Rockcliffe was in Purchasing, ordering anything from gasoline for the planes to white gloves for the band. The work wasn't challenging; and it was also boring when I moved to Inventory. I was surprised that if I took an article from a bin and it didn't match the inventory or the description, we just gave it a new number or a new description. We had to fill out vouchers for any discrepancies, and also for demands, issues, receiving, returning, exchanges, etc.

At that time, there were five males to every female on the station: 5,000 men and 1,000 women. Many of the men, and some of the women too, were married and lived off the station. At first the RCAF wouldn't accept married women, so some enlisted without declaring their married status. Most of these had husbands overseas or elsewhere in the military. The rules were changed a few years later: after 1943, women who married while in the service weren't automatically discharged.

One cloud over my early days at Rockcliffe was my battle with the mumps. One icy March morning, I awoke with girls all around my bunk, pointing at my swollen face and whispering. When the corporal took my temperature, she hurried away to call the ambulance. Unfortunately it was one of the coldest days of the winter, and all the vehicles were frozen. So even though I was so sick, I had to walk to the base hospital! The girls surrounded me to form a barrier against the cold wind while I staggered along a narrow path across the fields, deep in snow. But when the whistle blew for work, they had to leave. The corporal walked in front to keep the wind off me, but I was so ill I could hardly keep on the path.

Then running footsteps came behind us, and two airmen made a chair with their arms and carried me to the hospital. The nursing sister tried to order me to the end of the line, but they took me straight in to the MO. He decided I should be sent to the WD hospital at Manning Depot. The ambulance was operational now, but the CO was using it while his car was frozen! So Motor Transport sent me an old panel van. While we waited, the nursing sister had a big discussion with the sergeant about the red wool blanket she had put around me. The sergeant wouldn't let me take it with me into the icy cold panel van, as that would make their inventory short by one. By the time I did get to the hospital, I was ready to collapse.

Next morning at breakfast, I sat up, swung my legs over the side of the bed and took a sip of coffee. That was the last thing I remembered. The girl in the next bed heard my coffee slop on the floor as I passed out. She ran over and caught me, pushed me back on the bed and hollered for help. I didn't wake up until sometime next day.

The medical officer greeted me with: "You've been a bad girl, we almost lost you." I tried to raise my head. Her warning to lie still came too late; I was out again. Later, semi-conscious, I heard some girls talking about someone who was dying. I asked a nurse who it was. She said no one was dying; but I heard her go into the next room and say, "Shh, she can hear you!"

After two weeks there I still felt very tired and dizzy, and would collapse when I tried to stand up. But the MO told the nursing sister that Orders required that mumps cases should be discharged after two weeks; and she thought I'd recovered, because "All mumps patients have round faces." (Mine wasn't that round.) So I was discharged and told to go straight to work – walking all the way. I was chilled to the bone, and a few days later was back on sick parade. The MO sent me home, where my mother cried out, shocked: "Mary, you still have the mumps, you should be in hospital!" I went back to Rockcliffe with a 104 degrees temperature; and finally spent four weeks in hospital and was granted three weeks sick-leave to recuperate at home. That was the end of the mumps saga.

When I returned to duty the WD officer put me on "station detail" for a week, which was a heavy load when you're coming back from sick leave. After my day's work, I'd be on duty in the canteen, the Officer's Mess kitchen, or anywhere else they needed help. Seeing how thin and pale I was, the Officer's Mess cook gave me French pastries every night to build me up.

Since I never wanted to be on station detail ever again, I studied hard for my trade C levels and passed with 100 percent. (This was despite the fact that I had to relearn all the first half of the course: the fall at Trenton had erased it from my memory.) My sergeant was posted out, and Corporal Atkinson, who replaced him, was unfamiliar with the work. I had full knowledge of the job from typing the sergeant's letters, and was able to tell the corporal what he needed to know. He appreciated this.

One night when I was alone on duty, two Flying Fortresses arrived at the base. These were big four-engine B-17 bombers (from which our mechanics later removed the bombing apparatus, to turn them into transport planes for delivering mail overseas). The two American pilots had been told to fly the planes to Canada's capital (and were quickly corrected when they tried to land in Toronto!). The call came for someone to sign the planes in. Well, I'd never checked an aircraft in my life, and didn't even know where No. 1 Hangar was – but I said I'd do it, since I felt it was my responsibility. I certainly didn't want to call on any man to do it, since I felt we had to show them we could do the work!

So I started locking up the equipment section, when a call came from Motor Transport that two new trucks had to be signed on as well. The caller, Corporal Cameron, was a friendly, fatherly type, and he directed me to No. 1 Hangar, which was usually out of bounds for any personnel who didn't work there. Going into that restricted area made me rather nervous, especially since the large hangar was completely dark. Then two mechanics crawled out from under a plane and pointed a flashlight in the right direction. The Flying Forts looked huge and clumsy on the ground, and the pilots were late and hungry. I checked over the papers and had them swear all the equipment was on board – or I was going to inspect everything! They assured me it was. Up till then, signing on heavy equipment was considered a man's job. I proved a teenage girl could do it as well.

Through all this time, our family had no news of Herbie; and my parents aged as they suffered through the days, weeks and months. We all hoped that he would survive his ordeal; but in February 1944, my parents received the news that he was dead – that he had died on December 28, 1943, a few days after his 22nd birthday. It was a terrible shock to them.

They sent me a telegram at Rockcliffe; and what followed was very sad and rather stupid. Apparently the telegram went to the padre, who said that since he didn't know me, he shouldn't be the one to tell me. (Though I really couldn't understand, when I found this out, why he wouldn't want to break the news and comfort me.) So the news of my brother's death sat in the office for most of the day and on into the evening, and gradually circulated around the base – till it seemed that everyone knew but me. That night I was called to the barracks office. I thought it was a phone call from my boyfriend, who was expected at Uplands the following day, and I didn't understand why Mary Homer insisted on accompanying me to the office. When I read the telegram, I was grateful to her for being there.

After the war, we learned that a Japanese doctor was responsible for my brother's death. He was sentenced to twelve years in prison for his crime. I still feel that our family should have received an apology. Only those who have been through such a thing can know how much we all suffered. A part of Harry died with his twin brother.

I was immediately given leave to go home; but because it was so late, the only train I could take was a troop train leaving Ottawa at four a.m. It was full of soldiers from Saskatchewan. One of them, Gordon Lee, tried to become acquainted; but I was too tired and sad to be friendly. Afterwards I wondered where all those young men went, and how many returned home. There was so much sadness in those years, one never fully got away from it. My parents felt that five children in uniform was almost too much. Edna had joined CWAC; and before the war was over, my youngest brother, aged fifteen, joined the army reserve.

That winter, it seemed every time I went home I heard of someone else being killed. My brother was the third one from our small church. A pilot from South Durham I had dated a few times was shot down over the St. Lawrence by German submarines. A boyfriend of my sister's was also shot down: she had talked to him from the control tower just moments before he crashed.

In 1944 there were always long troop trains going east. Once when I changed trains at Montreal, three RCAF fighter pilots on their way to Europe boarded the train with me. One was called Anderson, from British Columbia, and spoke longingly of the beauty of the mountains. "I don't know if I'll come back," he said coolly. He was only nineteen. When I disembarked at Sherbrooke, he insisted on carrying my bag. I turned to thank him and wish him luck; and he quickly grabbed me and kissed me good-bye. "As soon as I saw you, I bet the fellows I'd kiss you good-bye," he said. He was such a nice young man, I couldn't be angry.

That summer, I was sent to Trenton again for the Senior NCO course. We studied Air Force law and orders, procedures, drill and public speaking – the latter was intimidating. I was second in the class when I graduated, qualified for the rank of Flight Sergeant.

It was also that summer that I first got acquainted with an airplane! A girlfriend called Hank asked me if I'd like to go flying. She got passes for us both, and managed to get on an Anson that was taking the padre to deliver a sermon. I asked the pilot if I could fly on the return trip. When he said I could, I never moved so fast in all my life! Once we were airborne, he explained all the instruments – then let me take the co-pilot controls. We flew over the Gatineau Hills, a bright blue sky above and colourful fall foliage below – it was breathtaking. The only mistake I made was not keeping an eye on the altitude, and flying too high. When I corrected the plane, I found how sensitive the control stick was: the passengers in the back had their books and papers pulled from their laps in one quick swoop.

Another weekend, Hank got us passes for a trip on a Goose, a beautiful white amphibian. The two pilots were planning on taking a swim in the Ottawa River, and didn't look too happy at having to scrub their plans. (They may have felt like tossing us into the river!) We landed on the water, bouncing the nearby boats – some of the Sunday sailors shook their fists at us.

We managed to have quite a bit of fun when we weren't working. Montréal was a great place to visit during the 1940s. For New Year's Eve 1943-1944, a boyfriend took me to the brightest spot in town: the Normandy Roof on top of the Mount Royal Hotel. Dan Tucker's Orchestra used to broadcast from there every Saturday night. For New Year's, they served a sumptuous dinner and had a magnificent floor show. The fill-in between shows was the young Oscar Peterson, and he got a standing ovation. I can still remember the decorations and the beautiful long evening gowns.

We had entertainment back in Ottawa too, and even at Rockcliffe. In town I saw Gracie Fields and the Jack Benny Show at the Forum. Victor Borge performed at one of the theatres, along with Joel McCrea and Dorothy Dee. The RCAF Central Band supplied the music. We had many live shows at Rockcliffe too, sponsored by such big businesses as Eaton's, Bell Canada and Massey Harris. All the shows had musicians, skits, chorus girls, monologues, magic acts, etc. Most were very good – though one was rather racy, which in 1944 was not well received!

We had a movie theatre too; the American Air Force Band entertained at Rockcliffe on its way overseas; and there were station dances on Saturday nights. Once, Jimmy Cagney and his sister performed there. (It was a big surprise for me, next day, to meet him walking across the parade square. I didn't recognize him at first; but his walk was so rhythmic that I half expected him to break into a dance! All my friends were thrilled when they heard about this.)

The greatest thing about being in uniform was the many friends I made. In addition to Helen and Dodo, Mary Homer and Hank, there were Joyce and Patti; Grace Fraser, who shampooed my hair after my fall (and said my head was black and blue all over the back); and Phyllis Hamilton, with whom I've attended three reunions. Our sergeant-major used to call us "the gold-dust twins," because of our blond hair. There were many other friends, both male and female, and I still think of them fondly.

Anonymous

"I think the women's movement was a backlash by women who had taken some part in winning the war and were not prepared to be relegated to the home again".

"In the sixties, when they once again promoted a man over me in my department, I was angry and decided that was enough. I had trained and corrected the work of these men who kept advancing over me. I went to the Director's office and said that I would not take it anymore. What was the reply? "You just came back from holidays." "You don't need the money." "The person who was given the promotion has three young children." "What in the blazes does that have to do with my job?" I asked. I resigned because you couldn't beat that attitude. Pay equity has been a long time coming and it will be a long time before society really changes. It's made some steps towards changing, but I don't see enough. I think that women need to just keep on fighting for equality. I know it's easier not to fight, but don't take it!"

"Women are more than mothers, just as men are more than fathers – they are historians, electricians, ministers, they are in all fields. We should also have that choice. Ideally, it should be a partnership, and we are a long way from that. Not all of the women in the navy went into the workplace after the war. Many went into the home. Some women felt that they should be mothers, that they were solely responsible for producing the next generation. Which is fine. Unfortunately, at times some women feel threatened because, in order to do the job of Mother at home, they need someone to go out and earn the money. I, personally, feel that day-care can provide a type of enrichment for a child, quite different from what an at-home mother can provide. For one thing, there is more contact with other children. I think that provides an advantage, because the children are learning social skills at a very young age."

"I had been out with a boy from back home. We were just good friends, and I was glad to see him again. We were coming home and we were in the back of the taxi. He tried to kiss me and I shouted, "Yech, what are you doing?" It was the first and only time someone tried to kiss me and put his tongue in my mouth. I was disgusted. The taxi driver nearly put us into the harbour. He laughed so hard! He had to stop the car and finish laughing. I didn't think it was funny at all. He was such a nice person and I just don't know what happened to him!"

"I cannot imagine anyone being more humiliated than I was when I had to go through with my medical. The night before, I was out with a couple of people. One was a boy who was in medicine and in the navy. There were a lot of us called in for our medicals that day. We were sitting on a wooden bench on the side of the room. It held about four or five people. We heard all sorts of rumours from people who had gone through this before. We asked questions about it and what was involved. Everybody always said that the medical is the only thing to worry about."

I got to talking to the other girls that morning. Two or three of them said, "I've never been in front of a man naked." I thought, Who has? As it turned out, they said, "Well, I've heard that when you do your medical, you're in the nude." The time came and, one by one, we were called in. Each time we made a pact that we would come out after and tell each other what it was like and whether we were in the nude or not. As the girls came out, they just whisked by. No one even stopped or turned to look at us. We would be yelling, "Well, how about it?" Not one of the girls ahead of me turned to say anything.

Finally, my turn came, and I went in. The doctor was sitting there with his head down toward the desk. I heard him mumble something. The only part that I heard was "on the chair." I thought, He wants me to put my clothes on the chair. So I put all my clothes on the chair. When he looked up, he said, "Oh my God, no! You on the chair!" To make matters worse, the doctor was the boy who had been on the date the night before! You can't imagine. It was humiliation beyond belief. I never dressed so fast in my life!"

"I felt a big responsibility to my service. It's a wonderful thing to belong to an organization and to feel the pride and accomplishment that you can do it and you really consider yourself a part of it."

"I think women have made a place for themselves since the war. It's been a long time coming, but they are doing a darn good job. We have many more famous women now. It's been a hard struggle for women to get where they are. It seems it is very difficult for women as a group to make a mark. Individually, some women have, and it will eventually come together. In other countries, women have been Prime Ministers and in other leadership roles for much longer. Here, we have some fine women coming forward. You have to get out there and fight for your right, and then they'll accept you."

"Just about in the middle of crossing the ocean on our way to England, I was standing on the deck speaking with an officer when, all of a sudden, balloons started floating up from below! "Where are all those balloons coming from," I asked, quite perplexed. Was I ever red-faced when the officer explained they were safes. A "safe" was what condoms were called then."

"In the air force we learned to drink and often we worked midnight shifts. One of the girls was getting married and the reception was at a local restaurant. We walked back in the fog and I had had a few drinks. I was on a midnight shift. At about two o'clock in the morning, there was nothing going on so I told the rest of the shift that I was going to lie down for a little while. Next thing I knew, someone was kicking me and saying, "The officer is looking for you." I came out from under the table quietly and said as innocently as I could, "Were you looking for me, sir? I was in the washroom."

"In Britain, no church bells rang at all. For that whole time during the war, they didn't ring. If they had rung, it would have meant that we were being invaded."

"I met the old Queen Mother, Mary, twice. Once when I was off duty, and once when I was driving the big van back to the airfield. It was raining, and all the van's contents fell out in front of the royal car as we drove up a narrow street in the city of Bath."

"Five years is a long time for a girl just out of school to serve in the armed forces, especially during a dreadful war, and it left me with a profound feeling of futility and misery for the families who lost sons and daughters. A friend of mine died in her truck when the ammunition in it blew up. Another girlfriend was killed along with about thirty other young women when a Lancaster bomber landed at night on their sleeping quarters. I was away for that weekend or I wouldn't be here writing this."

I didn't really think about or resent the war taking over all our lives until this one time when I met these Italian prisoners of war. British and Canadian airmen had to *walk* to where they were learning how to be instructors for the pilots. I was sent with this 32-seater bus to pick up Italian POWs from the Italian POW camp, which was outside our camp. That really infuriated me. So I stopped along the way and gave our guys a ride. Of course, I was called up and told that I mustn't do that. I replied that I would continue to! It's surprising I wasn't put in the clink! Later, I was assigned an Italian POW to clean the ambulance. He could speak a little English and said to me, "I don't think you like me very much, do you?" I said, "You've ruined my life! If it wasn't for you and the Germans, I'd be doing what I wanted to instead of being here, doing this!" He was really upset, poor guy. War shatters dreams.

The Legion does a very good job with visiting the schools and talking with the students, but that seems limited to November 11. That is not sufficient coverage of the military in my opinion. Service members should be proud of their uniform and look smart, learn what the

Department of National Defence is teaching, and apply that knowledge to the best of your ability. To Canadians, especially to Canadian women – teach our children to make friends with people from different countries, younger and older. If we can't get along together, how can this be the peaceful country so many went to war for? Canada was meant to be a peaceful nation.

At the luncheon,[1] I spoke with a navy woman who was highly trained in radar. She was married to a military man and they had one child. She'd been active overseas, had her career and a family. I thought, how can she handle all that? Her husband was a big help, which made the difference. They arranged that, when he were away, she would be at home and vice versa. I was really impressed.

When I visited the Canadian War Museum and toured the Sea King helicopter they had trucked in, I was impressed to find that the captain of the aircraft was a smart, enthusiastic, French Canadian-woman. I was proud of her for flying that Sea King aboard a ship. That type of skill says something very positive about present-day women.

We wrens were always treated with respect – except for one officer who wrote in my discharge papers that I was very clean and reliable, but temperamental!

I got into trouble once. I forgot to put the leather chin-strap back on my hat after cleaning it, and I appeared for duty without it. The sergeant in charge of the fire picket there would tell you if your hair was hanging down or whatever. I had taken my strap off to clean it. It was the strap that went around the front of my hat. It was to go under your chin if you ever needed it. The strap was there to keep our hat on if we were running or active, you didn't want to be worrying about your hat coming off. The sergeant told me that next time I had to wear the strap on my hat. I was embarrassed.

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[1] At the WWII Womens' History month commemorative luncheon held on October 26, 1999, to mark Women's History month, veterans were introduced to women currently serving in the Canadian Forces.

"All the parcels I sent overseas to my husband made it to him, except when I sent him skates. He was in Holland at the time. I had written "Skates" on the package because you had to declare what was in parcels. Every other parcel got to him – he was in England, then France and then even in Germany! I guess I should have written something else."

"During the Second World War, men and women didn't know what would happen tomorrow. The sexual attitudes of some were very liberated, to say the least. The fact that only single women could join the forces[2] made for a very carefree attitude. The pilots had a survival rate that was very short, and young couples who fell in love did not have the luxury of time to court each other. People lived day to day. The result of that mentality was a fair amount of pregnancy. Of course, unmarried women who became pregnant had to resign from the service. In a lot of cases, the family back home would not even know about it; the babies were given up for adoption. That was the way it was done. The woman would get a dishonourable discharge. That would not happen today."

"When any of our group had a birthday, we would go to the Sally Ann where there was a place to relax and have a snack. We would all celebrate by lighting up a cigarette, although none of us smoked. I guess it was one way of letting our hair down. When we were looking for fun on leave we would hitchhike to Chester or Hubbards[3] and spend the night in a hotel. We would go skinny-dipping in the ocean by the light of the moon and it was so cold! One year two wrens and I rented a boat in Chester and rowed out to an island. All the cottages on the islands were closed during the war. Most of them belonged to Americans. We just went out to a beautiful cottage and made ourselves a home on the tennis courts and pretended it was our cottage."

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2 The original emphasis was on recruiting young unmarried women, and all three women's services by wars end had married officers.

"I think that people from the three different services got along well. I really didn't have much to do with any of the other services because we were so navy-oriented in Halifax. In those days, each service had its own uniforms and we were proud of our own uniforms. I think that unification was a mistake as it reduced pride in each service's uniform and traditions. Today the Canadian Forces have gone back to wearing different uniforms, but before, with unification, it was the green uniform. Some people called them the green hornets. Nowadays, we have the peacekeepers and they do a marvellous job. We definitely need ships; for patrolling and sea rescue. The air force plays a big part in patrolling and the air-sea rescue. I think we still need that. The army can be the peacekeepers, because they have the tanks and land equipment. I still think we need all three services. Also, I believe we should always be prepared in case of an emergency!"

"We played cards and I knitted on the train while going out west. The other girls would often tease me in the barracks about my knitting. I would knit as I read and they used to say the better the story got, the faster I would knit."

"I went to Hiroshima after the war, and I could feel myself breaking out in goose bumps. It was all coming back to me. I could not move forward. I could feel for these people, the feeling was the same as when I was in Calais, France. I don't have the words to describe this tightening of the chest. The atrocities all come back and overtake you, almost paralyse you. The eerie, haunted feeling – the other side did a lot to us, but we were no angels, we did a lot to them. That is the reality of war. You had to do what you did at the time. Sometimes, with some of these atrocities that we hear about, we need to put ourselves into those shoes, at the time. You've been trained to do this job and the enemy is coming, and this enemy will attack your brothers that are with you and you are closer to the people in your unit than siblings and you will protect them as a mother protects a child. It's

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[3] Two Nova Scotia communities on the South Shore near Halifax; Chester is located on Mahone Bay, and Hubbards is on St. Margaret's Bay.

not that you're bad, you've got the enemy in front of you and you have to take action."

"I saw too much sudden death for a young girl to really understand, but nowadays war still seems to be everywhere. There is much young girls could do by contributing and serving in the armed forces. With the all-pervasive television, young people see war played out in their living rooms. But I wonder if it is any more real to them? I would like to see all young people who are fit enough do two years of service after they left school, the camaraderie, discipline and sense of self worth would help them in life, for always."

Message from the Defence Women's Advisory Organization

DND/CF Advisory Groups

Were first approved for DND members on February 10, 1994 by the Deputy Minister and for CF members, on October 9, 1997 by the Defence Diversity Council. The intent was to formally establish an employee advisory committee (or network) of volunteers on a local and national level for each of the designated groups in DND, those being Women, Aboriginal Peoples, Persons with Disabilities and Members of Visible Minorities.

The purpose was that these groups would act as a forum for new ideas and strategies to improve recruitment, training and retention of designated group employees and to liaison between the Department and the designated group members on issues that may affect them and the Department as a whole. Work undertaken by the committee/network members should be regarded as part of their ongoing responsibilities, which will serve the best interests of the Department as internal consultation mechanisms.

The main goal is to assist DND/CF in its efforts to establish a workforce of qualified members and employees that reflect the diversity of Canadian Society.

Defence Women's Advisory Organization (DWAO)

As a volunteer organization the DWAO is committed to recognizing the contributions of all individuals along the path to achieving its Vision. DWAO's unique organizational design resembles a massive network of clusters working autonomously and continuously self-organizing toward achieving its higher order – One Defence team that values everyone.

Accordingly, the DWAO classifies its membership into one of three categories for ease of communication – Associates, Supporters and Observers. Furthermore, it acknowledges the legitimacy of individuals to interact with the DWAO in more than one of these capacities. It is incumbent upon members to respect DWAO obligations, values and approach so as eliminate any potential dilemmas between the various categories.

Associates

Associates are volunteers who actively participate in DWAO activities. Participation takes many forms including but not limited to those who:

- Hold positions which may be elected, also called Elected Associates;
- Contribute to special interest groups or sub-committees; or
- Attend scheduled meetings.

Individuals are free to place themselves in this category regardless of their ability to directly participate in activities.

Supporters

Supporters are those that share our Vision and organizational philosophy and are interested in being kept informed of our activities on a regular basis. Although Supporters are not current volunteers they may take an active role at their discretion and are valued for their ability to be recognized and approached as like-minded members of DND/CF.

Observers

Observers are those who have been informed of DWAO developments, are considered part of the network, but do not receive communications on a regular basis.

DWAO National Executive

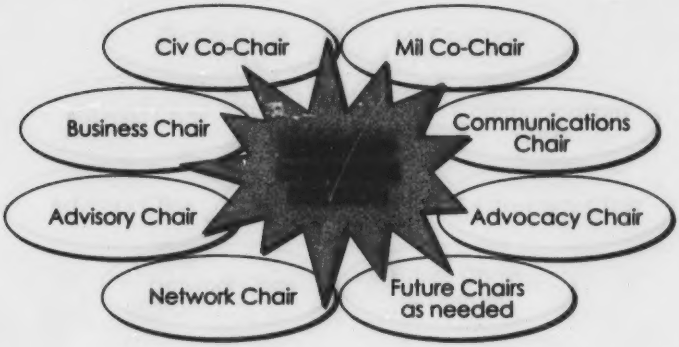
The DWAO consists of the National Executive (DWAO NE) and the DWAO Elements each composed of Associates, Supporters and Observers. The DWAO NE is the body that addresses national level and international level subjects on behalf of the DWAO. It consists of Elected Associates, Associates and Supporters. The Elected Associates are those positions or individuals needed to:

- Administer collectively the affairs of DWAO;
- Facilitate the flow of information to and from the DWAO Elements, the Defence Diversity Council (DDC), the Deputy Minister (DM) and the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS); and
- Facilitate external and international communications.

Elected Associates are entrusted with DWAO's administration through leadership and have the obligation to facilitate and ensure decision on issues as described in their Operating Principles. As a minimum, DWAO volunteers choose the Military and Civilian Co-Chairs at the AGM. In addition, the National Executive has other Elected Associates, as determined by the Associates, to meet its governing needs, such as the following Function Chairs:

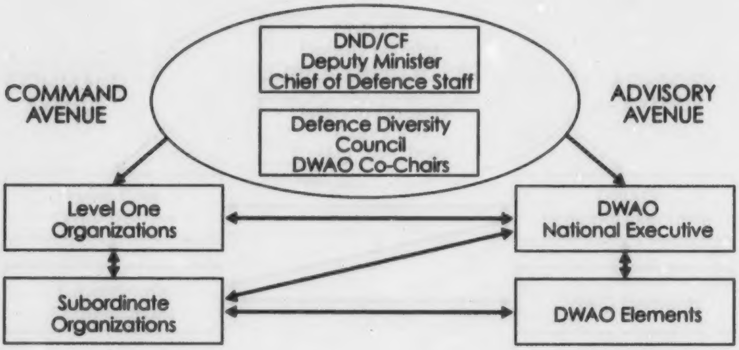
- Advisory Chair
- Advocacy Chair
- Networking Chair
- Communication Chair
- Business Chair

The diagram below depicts the DWAO NE


Civ Co-Chair
Mil Co-Chair
Business Chair
Communications Chair
Advisory Chair
Advocacy Chair
Network Chair
Future Chairs as needed

DWAO Structure

The DWAO co-exists with the DND/CF chain of command. The Co-Chairs (Military and Civilian) of the DWAO NE sit as DWAO's representative to the DDC and is the only formal connection to the Chain of Command. All other relationships are developed in an advisory capacity to meet needs as they arise. The diagram below depicts this visually:


DND/CF
Deputy Minister
Chief of Defence Staff
Defence Diversity Council
DWAO Co-Chairs
COMMAND AVENUE
ADVISORY AVENUE
Level One Organizations
DWAO National Executive
Subordinate Organizations
DWAO Elements

The organization of DWAO itself is based on a network concept with complete authority and responsibility for local issues vested with an Element as it is developed. The National Executive role is to facilitate the network issues as a whole to address common national and international themes at the highest levels within DND/CF.

The DWAO symbol is an image of its vision, mission, and values, serving to visually foster its raison d'être. As volunteers their membership are the Defence team. The stylized maple leaf reminds of our national focus by instilling the idea of Canada while the imbedded four faces of different colours reminds us of the underlying organizational diversity involved in making DND and the CF a successful team. The faces also emphasize the consultative nature of our raison d'être while their close proximity represents the successful realization of the DWAO vision and mission.

Values

The DWAO values began with the first steps to developing the organization and are enduring aspirations that reflect its vision, mission and the ethical principles and obligations of the Defence culture its members are part of. All are equally important, both to the members personally and to the success of the collective organization:

- *Inclusiveness.* Everyone is welcome, everyone is to benefit, everyone is affected by issues that affect women.
- *Representative.* Seeking to understand the wide perspective by being a diverse organization and being successfully able to resolve differences.
- *Respect.* Acceptance of the views and positions of others and one's own right to contribute – contribute without offence, receive contribution without defensiveness.
- *Openness and Honesty.* Say what is meant, mean what is said, and act without hidden agendas embracing the spirit of truthfulness.

- *Trustworthiness.* Walk one's talk and follow through on one's commitments.
- *Integrity.* Put the right thing above all other goals.
- *Loyalty.* Support of others and their welfare is as important as one's own interests and actions reflect positive resolution to conflicting loyalties.

For directions on how to be placed on the DWAO membership listing as an associate, supporter or observer, please contact the Advisory Group Secretariat at (613) 992-0201 or (613) 992-0204.

Glossary

ACHQ: Atlantic Combined Headquarters, the RCN-RCAF headquarters on South Street in Halifax, established in 1943 by Rear-Admiral Leonard M. Murray to direct combined operations in the northwest Atlantic.

Ack-ack:
1. In the phonetic alphabet used during the First World War, the initials AA.
2. Anti-aircraft guns, and anti-aircraft fire.

ADC:
1. Aide-de-camp.
2. Aircraft Detection Corps, an organisation of civilian volunteers who watched for and reported foreign aircraft in Canadian airspace.

AFHQ: Air Force Headquarters in Ottawa.

Aldis lamp: Named after its inventor, A.C.W. Aldis; a large electric lamp used for signalling in Morse code, especially between ships, or between ships and shore establishments.

Allerton Park: An estate in the North Riding of Yorkshire, the property of the Mowbray family until 1942, when the Air Ministry took it over. From 1942 until 1945, the manor house, Allerton Hall, accommodated the headquarters of No. 6 Group, Bomber Command, Royal Air Force, which was composed of RCAF squadrons. Staff officers employed there dubbed the house "Castle Dismal."

Anson: The AVRO Anson, a small, twin-engine, multi-place aircraft used for transport and training.

AOC: Air Officer Commanding.

Armoured column: A formed body of armoured fighting vehicles on the move.

ASDIC:
1. Allied Submarine Detection Investigation Committee, the organisation that developed sonar.
2. Sonar (RN and RCN).

AW1: Airwoman First Class.

AW2: Airwoman Second Class.

AWOL: Absent without leave.

Bailey bridge: Named for its inventor, the English engineer Sir Donald Coleman Bailey (1901-1985), a mobile bridge designed for rapid assembly from prefabricated parts. Widely used by British and Commonwealth combat engineers since the Second World War.

BCATP: The British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, the world's biggest aircrew-production scheme, launched on December 17, 1939, with the signing of the BCATP Agreement by representatives of Canada, Britain, Australia and New Zealand. Canada agreed to assume most of the program costs, but only if training would be Canada's top war priority and if Canadian aircrew would belong to the RCAF even when serving with other Allied air forces. Using RAF policies and standards, the RCAF carried out the training program with support from the Canadian Flying Clubs Association, commercial aviation companies, and the federal Department of Transport. Training began on April 29, 1940, and ceased on March 31, 1945. At its peak, the BCATP had 231 sites and 291 units (including 107 schools), with 10,906 aircraft and 104,113 personnel. The Canadian government paid more than 1.6 billion dollars to support the BCATP, 75 percent of its total cost. In five years of operation, the BCATP produced 131,553 pilots, navigators, bomb-aimers, wireless operators, air gunners and flight engineers, of whom 72,835 were Canadian – enough to form 80 RCAF squadrons (40 for overseas service and 40 for the Home War Establishment) and contribute about 25 percent of the overall strength of RAF squadrons. Almost 50 percent of the aircrew involved in British and Commonwealth flying operations were BCATP graduates.

BEM: The Medal of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, for Meritorious Service, more commonly known as the British Empire Medal, awarded to "persons who render meritorious service warranting such mark of Our Royal appreciation." The BEM came in two versions, Civil (purple ribbon) and Military (purple ribbon with a red stripe up the middle), and was awarded to foreigners as well as to British subjects.

Blitz: Heavy bombing raids on Britain, beginning in the late summer of 1940; adapted from *blitzkrieg (q.v.).*

Blitzkrieg: (German *blitz* [lightning] + *krieg* [war]). Wehrmacht invasion technique, involving deep thrusts into enemy territory by fast-moving armoured columns bypassing main points of resistance to encircle and eliminate defending forces. The armoured columns received close tactical support from squadrons of Stuka dive-bombers, acting as flying artillery.

Boatswain: Often spelled *bosun* or *bo's'n* to reflect pronunciation. Senior petty officer of the ship's company, in charge of seamanship and the overall efficiency of the crew.

Bottle the tot: Save one's tot *(q.v.)* so as to accumulate enough to get seriously drunk; a forbidden practice.

Brass: Also *brasshats.* Senior officers, from the gold lace on their uniforms, especially the visor of the cap (all services).

Bren gun: A Czech-designed automatic rifle used by British and Commonwealth troops from the 1930s until the late 1950s. The name is a concatenation of *Br*no, the city in Czechoslovakia where it was first made, and Enfield in England, where it was later manufactured.

Brownshirts: Also *storm troopers.* The *Sturmabteilung* [Storm Division], the brown-uniformed militia of the Nazi Party.

Buckmaster's Field: The Canadian army camp on the northern fringe of St. John's, Newfoundland.

Bumboat: A boat used by small businesses serving ships at anchor or moored to harbour buoys. Bumboat owners generally sold fruit, sweets and newspapers, and acted as agents for laundries and dry cleaners ashore.

Bunting-tosser: Visual signaller (flags, semaphore and lights), so called from the fabric of which signal flags are made.

Burgomaster: The mayor of a Dutch or Flemish town.

CAPO: Canadian Army Post Office.

CB: Confined to barracks.

CFB: Canadian Forces Base.

Civvies:
1. Civilian people.
2. Civilian clothing.

Civvy street: Out of the armed forces.

CO: Commanding Officer.

CPO: Chief Petty Officer (RN and RCN).

CWAAF: The Canadian Women's Auxiliary Air Force.

CWAC: The Canadian Women's Army Corps, or a member thereof.

D-Day: June 6, 1944, the day appointed for *Operation OVERLORD*, the Allied joint and combined operation to invade Normandy from ports in southern Britain.

Defaulter: A member of the armed forces accused or convicted of a minor service offence. A defaulter would be tried summarily by a Presiding Officer (usually, but not always, the commanding officer) who, despite strictly limited powers of punishment, could sentence defaulters to fines, stoppage of leave, confinement to barracks, extra work and drill, and short periods of incarceration.

Demob: British abbreviation for *demobilise;* release from the armed forces at the end of hostilities.

DEMS: Defensively Equipped Merchant Ship; a merchantman carrying deck guns, depth charges, and naval gunners.

DFC: The Distinguished Flying Cross, awarded to British and Commonwealth officers for "valour, courage or devotion to duty performed whilst flying in active operations against the enemy." The parallel decoration for non-commissioned personnel was the Distinguished Flying Medal.

Disband: To break up a regiment (army) or squadron (air force). In the army, *disband* has a pejorative connotation because disbandment is the traditional way of dealing with a disgraced unit. Militia regiments that expanded to several battalions during the Second World War were not disbanded when peace came; most were returned to the Militia order of battle, which meant reduction in strength to one very small battalion or even "reduction to nil strength."

Dispatch rider: A motorcycle- or bicycle-mounted messenger who carried urgent correspondence and small packages from unit to unit.

DND: The Department of National Defence.

DOC: Deputy Officer Commanding.

Doodlebug: *Vergeltungswaffe 1* or V1 *(q.v.).*

Draft:
1. *(v. tr.)* To appoint a rating, petty officer or officer to a ship or shore establishment (RN and RCN).
2. *(n.)* A group of naval personnel organised under the command of a leading hand, petty officer or officer specifically for travel (RN and RCN).
3. *(v. tr.)* To compel a civilian to serve in the armed forces (conscript).
4. *(n.)* Compulsory service in the armed forces (conscription).

DVA: The Department of Veterans Affairs.

EAC HQ: Eastern Air Command Headquarters, the RCAF Home War Establishment headquarters in Halifax.

EFTS: Elementary Flying Training School in the BCATP *(q.v.)* organisation. At the EFTS, potential pilots began flying in small, simple aircraft such as the DeHavilland Tiger Moth. When they were able to fly safely on their own, pupils moved on to the SFTS *(q.v.)*

Evening Quarters: The Royal Navy end-of-day ritual, adopted by other Commonwealth navies, including the RCN; included mustering the ship's company (except the duty watch) by divisions, counting heads to ensure that no-one is missing, and lowering the flag. On Sundays and significant anniversaries (e.g., Dominion Day, Trafalgar Day), Evening Quarters expanded into the Sunset Ceremony, with the addition of (at least) a gun salute, prayers from Anglican *Book of Common Prayer,* and the hymn *St. Clement* ("The Day Thou Gavest, Dear Lord, Is Over").

Fairmile: An armed launch powered by large, powerful, gasoline-fired engines; used to patrol coastal waters and escort coastal convoys (RN and RCN).

F/O: Flying Officer; RCAF WD rank equivalent to Flight Lieutenant, a Captain in the army or a naval Lieutenant.

Forecastle:
Pronounced and often spelled *foc's'le.*
1. Foremost weather deck.
2. Forward compartment generally used as crew accommodation (RCN, from merchant usage).

Forty-eight: A two-day pass; permission to be absent for two days (all services).

Galley: The kitchen aboard a ship, boat or submarine.

Gash: Garbage (RN and RCN).

Hay box: Insulated container for transporting hot food, originally made of wood and insulated with hay but now generally made of metal or rigid plastic and insulated with Styrofoam. Hay boxes are often used with partially cooked cereals and stews, which use their residual heat to finish cooking so they arrive at their destination just done (all services, especially army).

Heads: The toilet aboard a ship, boat or submarine (RN and RCN).

HFDF: Pronounced *huffduff;* high-frequency direction-finding, a radar application (navy, air force)

H-hut: A cheap, all-purpose temporary building, usually wood-framed and clapboard-clad, shaped like an H with classrooms, offices or barrack space in the long wings, and common areas, such as washrooms, in the connecting section (all services).

HMCS: His (later Her) Majesty's Canadian Ship.

HMS: His or her majesty's submarine or ship.

Hurricane: The Hawker Hurricane, a single-engine, single-seat fighter much used by Fighter Command, particularly during the Battle of Britain but also throughout the war. Sturdy and stable in flight, it was good for training new pilots and for adapting to new weapons – it was the first RAF fighter-bomber. The Hurricane also lent itself to some desperate uses, such as the catapult-launch arrangement found on some larger armed freighters – flung off the ship's deck by an explosive-powered catapult, the pilot would fight or drive away whatever was threatening the ship, and then crash the Hurricane into the sea and wait for the freighter to come and rescue him. Originally built with a metal frame and fabric skin, the Hurricane was eventually entirely covered with aluminum; however, it was always comparatively cheap to make, and reparable at unit level even in some very out-of-the-way places, such as the western Sahara and southeast Asia.

IODE: Imperial Order of Daughters of the Empire, a women's organisation founded in 1900 by Margaret Polson Murray of Montreal to promote Britain and British institutions in Canada. During the First and Second World Wars, the IODE became an important force in community health and social services, especially with immigrants, children, and members of the armed forces and their families.

ITS: Initial Training School, the first level of aircrew training in the BCATP (q.v.) organisation. At the ITS, aircrew candidates received basic instruction in theory of flight and were tested exhaustively to assess their potential for the various aircrew trades. Testers were particularly interested in skill in mathematics and certain sensory gifts – visual acuity, oblique downward depth perception, and tolerance for acceleration and centrifugal force.

Jimmy:
1. The first lieutenant (second in command) of a warship (RN and RCN).
2. The Hermes figure on the cap badge of the Royal Canadian Corps of Signals.
3. An army signaller.

Joe job: Unskilled or menial labour, such as clearing snow, assisting the mess cooks, and standing guard (all services).

Kye: Thick cocoa made from sweetened slab chocolate melted in boiling water. Left to stand for a few minutes, a mug of kye would develop a floating top layer of cocoa butter (RN and RCN).

Killick:
1. A small anchor.
2. Leading Seaman or Leading Wren, from the foul-anchor rank badge worn on the left sleeve (RN and RCN).

Lancaster: The AVRO Lancaster, a four-engine long-range bomber much used by British and Commonwealth air forces. Prized for its manoeuvrability and flying characteristics, the Lancaster normally carried a crew of seven: pilot, navigator, wireless operator, bomb-aimer, mid-upper gunner, rear gunner and flight engineer. The Lancaster was also noted for its adaptability to a wide range of payloads – different types and mixes of bombs, torpedoes, and special radar and communications equipment, as well as freight and passengers.

Landau: Pronounced *lando,* a four-wheeled, hooded carriage with two facing bench seats, normally drawn by two horses in span; now generally used only in ceremonial processions.

LAW: Leading Air Woman.

Liberty boat:
1. A ship's boat used to ferry members of the ship's company ashore for a few hours of recreation and back again to the ship when the liberty period is over (RN and RCN).
2. In shore establishments (especially schools), a formation of ratings paraded off the base for a few hours of recreation after inspection by the Duty Officer or a Regulating Petty Officer. Such a group would be expected to return together at the appointed hour (RCN).

Lord Haw-Haw: The famous traitor William Joyce (1906-1946), who was born in the United States of Irish parents, and resident in England from 1922 until 1939. A card-carrying fascist since 1933, Joyce fled to Germany in 1939, travelling on a fraudulently obtained British passport. In Germany, he became a propaganda star on Radio

Hamburg, making daily broadcasts full of lies, abuse and threats against Britain, delivered in a fake upper-class voice. In 1945, Joyce was captured by the British, tried for treason at the Old Bailey, and hanged. The crucial prosecution evidence was the passport identifying Joyce as a British subject, which outweighed the defence argument that, as an American, he had no obligation of loyalty to Britain.

LdSH(RC): Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians), an armoured regiment formed as cavalry in 1900 to serve in the Boer War, made part of the Permanent Active Militia during the 1930s, and based at Sarcee Barracks in Calgary from before 1939 until 1998. Now based at Edmonton, Alberta, the Strathconas are now part of the Regular component of the Canadian Forces.

LSI: Landing Ship Infantry.

LST: Landing Ship Tank.

Mae West:
1. A popular American star of stage and screen, noted for her buxom figure and salacious dialogue.
2. A bulky kapok-filled life jacket, so called because of the large main flotation cells on the chest, which were accentuated by a waist belt (navy and air force).

Maginot Line: The system of defences built by the French government during the 1930s to prevent invasion from Germany; named for André Maginot, Minister of War, president of the Army Commission of the Chamber of Deputies, and a veteran of the 1914 German invasion of France. The main section of the Maginot Line was in northeast France, extending from La Ferté (30 km east of Sedan) to the Rhine; more fortifications were built along the Rhine and on the Italian frontier. The La Ferté-Rhine section included 22 huge underground fortresses, 36 smaller fortresses and many blockhouses and bunkers; however, the main thrust of the German invasion in the spring of 1940 went through Belgium and into the heart of France without engaging the Maginot Line defences at all. When the German army was retreating before the Allied forces in 1945, the Maginot Line fortresses helped them force the Allies to cross the Rhine in northern Germany.

Make-and-mend: An afternoon off duty, traditionally used to make and mend clothing (RN and RCN).

MARS officer: Maritime Surface/Subsurface officer, the modern Canadian Forces designation for an Executive Branch naval officer.

Matelot: Pronounced *matlow*, consistent with the original French; naval ratings' preferred term for themselves.

Matilda: A slow, heavily armoured tank designed for infantry support; used by the British Army early in the Second World War. The armour made the Matilda difficult to knock out until the Germans began to use their 88-mm anti-aircraft gun as an anti-tank weapon. The Matilda tank continued in service in other theatres (e.g., with the Australian Army in the southwest Pacific) until 1945.

MD: Manning Depot (RAF and RCAF).

Mess:
1. The smallest subdivision of a warship's company for eating and sleeping purposes. Each class – boys, stokers, seamen, petty officers, chief petty officers and officers – had its separate mess or messes, and rigid custom and regulation decided who could mess with whom. The size of a mess was usually determined by the number who could sit at the table, and each mess was designated by either a number or a name (e.g., Wardroom [officers' mess], Gunroom [midshipmen's mess]) (RN and RCN).
2. An establishment offering at least some of the facilities and services typically found in a large private house – i.e., dining room, sitting room, lounge, library, games room and bedrooms – for the officers or senior NCOs of a specific unit (army and air force).

Messerschmidt: German aircraft company founded by aviation designer and production chief Wilhelm (Willy) Messerschmitt (1898-1978). Most noted for the Me 109, a single-engine fighter that set a world speed record in 1939, Messerschmidt was the Luftwaffe's foremost supplier of combat aircraft throughout the Second World War. The Me 262, the first jet aircraft to fly in combat (1944), was the last original Messerschmidt design to go through production and into operational service.

MP: Military Police.

MIR: Medical Inspection Room; the out-patient clinic on a Canadian Forces base.

MO: Medical Officer, specifically a licensed physician or surgeon (all services)

Morse code: Named for its inventor, Samuel Morse, a binary system of dots and dashes used to represent letters and numbers. Until the development of wireless voice transmission during the 1920s, Morse code was the primary means of communication by telegraph or radio.

MSU: Mobile Signals Unit (army).

MT: Motor Transport (all services).

Muster: Formally assemble and count people or things; e.g., *kit muster,* an inspection of issued clothing and equipment to ensure that all members of a unit have all the kit items they are supposed to have; *page muster,* an inspection of classified documents to ensure that all pages are present.

NCO: Non-Commissioned Officer; an army or air force member ranked between Corporal and Staff Sergeant or Flight Sergeant.

NDHQ: National Defence Headquarters.

Nissen hut: Named for its inventor, P.N. Nissen, a temporary building shaped like half a culvert, made of corrugated sheet iron bent semicircular and set over a slab of cement. Nissen huts came in a variety of sizes for use as hangars, warehouses, office space and (in particularly benighted places) living accommodation. Fitted with doors, windows and Quebec heaters, they could be comfortable but generally were not, especially in the cold, wet British winter; they were draughty and quite innocent of insulation, and always damp – even if the roof did not leak, condensation would form in the top of the curve of the roof and drip onto the miserable occupants.

NS: Nursing Sister.

OBE: Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire; a decoration for meritorious service generally awarded to senior officers and, therefore, said to represent Other Buggers' Efforts.

OR:
1. Orderly Room, the main administrative office of an army or air force establishment.
2. One of the "other ranks," a non-commissioned member of the armed forces.

OS: The official abbreviation of Ordinary Seaman, the lowest rank of the RN and RCN. For mysterious reasons, all naval personnel used "OD" instead.

OSS: The Office of Strategic Services (American military intelligence service), formed on July 13, 1942, under Colonel (later Major-General) William J. Donovan, a lawyer, politician and personal friend of President Roosevelt who was also a much-decorated hero of the First World War. Donovan spent 1941 in London studying the organisation and methods of the British secret service (then called the Special Operations Executive), which he used as a model for the OSS. The functions of the OSS were collection and analysis of foreign information, and the conduct of "special operations" under the control of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

OStJ: Officer of the Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of Saint John of Jerusalem. The Order of St. John, as it is commonly known today, was founded in Jerusalem during the 12th century to care for sick and wounded pilgrims. Still a sovereign entity, it now thrives as a major international honorary and charitable organisation noted for first-aid training and volunteer emergency medical services.

OTC: Officers' Training Course, the basic training for potential officers (all services).

Padre: (Spanish *padre* [father]). A chaplain (priest, minister or rabbi) serving in armed forces. In the navy, a chaplain was informally called *Parson* or *the sin bo's'n* until the 1950s, when the RN influence began to wane.

Petty officer: Non-commissioned officer *(q.v.)* in the RN or one of the Commonwealth navies.

PO:
1. Petty Officer (RN and RCN).
2. Pilot Officer (RAF and RCAF).

Pork pie: The brimless cap worn by wren ratings, a feminine version of the matelot's cap.

PoW: Prisoner of war.

Precision squad: A squad that performs a rehearsed drill routine without direct orders.

Probie: Probationer.

Provost: Pronounced *provo;* military policeman, from Royal Canadian Provost Corps.

PSO: Personnel Selection Officer, an officer charged with recruiting and assigning armed forces members to appropriate occupations.

PTI: Physical Training Instructor (army and RCAF)

PX: Post Exchange, the store on an American naval or military base that sells American groceries and household goods at very low prices.

QM: Quartermaster.

QOR(C): The Queen's Own Rifles of Canada, a Toronto infantry regiment.

Quebec heater: A pot-bellied stove, or any cylindrical coal- or wood-fired heating stove.

RCAF: Royal Canadian Air Force.

RCAMC: Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps.

RCASC: The Royal Canadian Army Service Corps, the Canadian army's administrators, supply people and transport drivers.

RCEME: Pronounced *reemy* (cf. REME); the Royal Canadian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, the Canadian army's corps of technicians and artisans.

RCN: Royal Canadian Navy.

REME: Pronounced *reemy;* the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, the British Army's corps of technicians and artisans.

Rickshaw wallah: (Japanese *jinricksha* [*jin* person + *rick* power + *sha* vehicle] + Hindi suffix wala [person responsible]) A man who pulls a light, two-wheeled, hooded vehicle.

Rig:
1. *(n)* The form and organisation of a ship's sails (RN, RCN).
2. *(v. tr.)* To outfit a ship with sails and prepare her for sea (RN, RCN).
2. Dress, specifically the dress prescribed for a particular time or event; e.g., *rig of the day* (RN, RCN).
3. A large vehicle, usually a truck (all services).

RMC: The Royal Military College of Canada, located in Kingston, Ontario. During the war, RMC operated as a staff college.

RN: The British navy, called the Royal Navy (or, maliciously, the Real Navy).

Rotogravure: A cheap process for printing coloured pictures, much used in newspapers.

RPO: Regulating Petty Officer, a petty officer of the Regulating Branch, which had particular responsibility for disciplinary administration. To serve in the Regulating Branch, one had to be at or above leading rate (i.e., Leading Seaman or Leading Wren).

RTO: Regimental Transport Officer, the officer responsible for all vehicles on the unit inventory, and in charge of all road moves.

Sally Ann: The traditional British nickname for the Salvation Army, a charitable Protestant sect noted for its work with displaced and distressed people. In wartime, the Salvation Army provided extensive social services for members of the armed forces and their families.

Service de guerre aérien: the Québécois equivalent of the Aviation Detective Corps, a civilian group organised to watch for and report foreign aircraft in Canadian airspace.

SFTS: Service Flying Training School in the BCATP *(q.v.)* organisation. At the SFTS, pilot pupils learned basic combat manoeuvres, air weapons; cross-country navigation and night-flying, using fairly powerful and complex training aircraft; e.g., the single-engine North American Harvard or Fleet Finch (for potential fighter pilots) and the twin-engine Airspeed Oxford, Cessna Crane or AVRO Anson (for potential bomber pilots). On successful completion of the SFTS course, students received the pilot's wing badge and went on to an Operational Training Unit.

Shore patrol: Naval security force, generally members of the ship's company told off to assist the Master-At-Arms to keep their shipmates in line.

Sick bay: The medical clinic in a warship or shore establishment (RN and RCN).

Siegfried Line: Allied soldiers' name for the *Westwall*, German frontier fortifications that originated in the Saar region opposite the Maginot Line (q.v.) and eventually extended to the Dutch and Swiss frontiers. The *Westwall* was a band about 5 km deep of more than 3,000 mutually supporting concrete pillboxes, troop shelters and command posts. Where no natural antitank obstacles existed, a belt of pyramidal concrete projections (dragon's teeth) barred the way. These defences were designed to delay an invading force until mobile reserves could counterattack. The name *Siegfried Line* was probably derived from *Siegfriedstellung* [Siegfried Fortress], a First World War defensive line; it became common in 1944, popularised by the British music-hall song *We're Going to Hang Out the Washing on the Siegfried Line.*

S/O: Squadron Officer; RCAF WD rank equivalent to Squadron Leader, Major (army) or Lieutenant-Commander (navy).

Sparks: A wireless telegraphist (radio operator).

Spit and polish:
1. Saliva and Kiwi brand boot polish, painstakingly applied with a rag wrapped around a finger to achieve a glassy finish on leather footwear and accessories.
2. A high standard of cleanliness and order.

Spitfire: The Supermarine Spitfire, a British single-seat, single-engine fighter that first came to wide-spread public notice during the Battle of Britain but was used by the British and Commonwealth air forces throughout the war. Prized for its speed, power and manoeuvrability, the Spitfire had only one serious fault: it closely resembled the equivalent German fighter, the Me 109.

Splice the main brace:
1. Issue a tot *(q.v.)* over and above the regulation allowance; done in celebration or to mark a major event.
2. Take a drink, especially of neat spirit.

Stalag: (German *Stamm* [base] + *Lager* [camp]); a permanent prisoner-of-war camp.

TABT: A composite inoculation against tetanus, paratyphoid type A, paratyphoid type B, and typhoid fever.

TAF: Tactical Air Force.

Tannoy: A British manufacturer of loudspeakers and public-address systems, widely used as a generic noun (all services).

Tiffy:
1. RN abbreviation of "artificer," a rating in one of a few skilled trades; e.g., a medical assistant or "sick berth artificer" was a *sick bay tiffy*, and the Chief Petty Officer of the engine-room was the *Chief Tiffy*.
2. The Hawker Typhoon, a single-seat, single-engine, low-level fighter-bomber armed with rockets as well as machine-guns and bombs, used for tactical support against ground targets, especially in northwest Europe in 1944-1945.

Tot: The 2½ fluid ounces (half a gill) of dark rum that was the free daily issue in the British and Commonwealth navies to every rating over twenty years old who "drew" – i.e., did not profess "temperance" and accept money in lieu. For ordinary, able and leading seamen, two parts of water was added to the neat spirit before issue. In Canada, the tot was stopped in 1972.

Triage: (French *triage* [sorting]) In medicine, the system for assigning priority to emergency patients, developed by front-line doctors in the French army during the 19th century and routinely used today. Military casualties in the line are sorted into three groups: those who can return to their units after minimal treatment; those who will recover eventually, given extensive treatment; and those who will die (the "moribund group"). Group I patients are treated and returned to their units immediately; Group II patients are stabilised and evacuated as soon as possible; and Group III patients are given palliative support (morphine and Last Rites) and evacuated after Group II. Triage permits the Field Ambulance to use its resources most cost-effectively in performing its primary task, which is to return soldiers to battle.

TTS: Technical Training School, an establishment for teaching ground crew trade skills (RCAF).

Typex: The RN encoding-decoding machine, used throughout the Commonwealth navies with Navy Code 3.

U-boat: (German *Unterseeboot* [under-the-sea boat]); a submarine

Upstairs: In the air.

VAD: Voluntary Aid Detachment, or a member thereof. VADs were organised at the beginning of the First World War to supply military and civilian hospitals with semi-skilled, non-professional nursing staff. At first, VAD members were to be employed only in Britain but, by 1916, the demand for field nurses and ambulance attendants was so great that women were serving in hospitals and ambulance units quite near the front lines in France and Belgium.

V1: *Vergeltungswaffe* [reprisal weapon] 1, officially designated FZG76 (*Fernzielgerät* [long range target apparatus] 76; known in Britain as the *buzz bomb* or *doodlebug*. A 25-foot flying bomb with a 16-foot wingspan and pulse-jet engine, capable of carrying a 1-ton warhead 152 miles (later 250 miles) at about 400 miles per hour. First flown on December 24, 1943, the V1 was usually launched from concrete ramps located in coastal France, but it could also be fired from a modified Heinkel 111 bomber. About 13,000 were fired but, because of a faulty guidance system, only about 20 percent reached their targets.

V2: *Vergeltungswaffe* [reprisal weapon] 2, officially designated A-4. A 46-foot, 13-ton, liquid-fuel rocket-bomb that carried a 1-ton warhead. First successfully fired on October 3, 1942, at Peenemünde, the V2 reached Mach 1 in less than 30 seconds, with a total burn time of 65-70 seconds; when aimed at long-range targets, it could reach a height of 50-60 miles. The V2 offensive began in September 1944 and ended on March 27, 1945; many of the rockets did not reach their targets but those that did caused great damage and many casualties. The main target areas were London (about 2,500 casualties) and Antwerp (more than 30,000 casualties).

Van Doos: The Royal 22^{e} Régiment, the French-speaking infantry regiment of the Regular component of the Canadian Forces; with battalions at CFB Valcartier and the Citadel in Québec City, which is its home station. Formed in 1914 as the 22nd Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force, the Royal 22^{e} Régiment is only unit in the Canadian Forces with a CEF battalion number in its official name.

VC: The Victoria Cross, the foremost British and Commonwealth decoration for exceptional bravery in the presence of the enemy, established in 1856 and, by 1972, awarded to 93 Canadian soldiers, sailors and airmen of all ranks. In 1972, Canada adopted its own system of honours, and discontinued the VC. In December 2000, Ernest Alva (Smokey) Smith of The Seaforth Highlanders of Canada was the only surviving Canadian VC recipient.

V-E Day: May 8, 1945, the day Germany formally capitulated to the Allied forces.

V-J Day: August 10, 1945, the day after the second atomic bomb attack on Japan and the Japanese government's announcement that it would accede to Allied demands for unconditional surrender. The formal capitulation was not signed until September 2, 1945.

V/S: Visual Signaller; a bunting-tosser *(q.v.)*

WAAF: Women's Auxiliary Air Force.

WAG: Wireless [Operator] Air Gunner, also abbreviated WOP/AG; the aircrew member responsible for operating the radio and firing the guns in a small bomber such as the Vickers Wellington.

War grant: Education allowance paid to veterans under the *Veterans' Rehabilitation Act* of 1945, one of the cornerstones of the veterans' benefit program.

WD: Pronounced *wid*, a member of the Royal Canadian Air Force Women's Division

WETP: Pronounced *wet-pee;* the War Emergency Training Plan, a scheme to upgrade the education of potential recruits, especially in mathematics and sciences, to make them more useful to the armed forces.

WOG: Wireless Operator, Ground

Wolf pack: A co-ordinated group of U-boats *(q.v.)* organised to attack convoys.

WRCNS: Pronounced *wrens;* the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service.

WRNS: Pronounced *wrens;* the Women's Royal Naval Service.

WT: Wireless telegraphy; radio.

WVS: Women's Voluntary Service, a British organisation set up in 1938 to support the Air Raid Precautions system and care for bombing victims. With Supply, Motor Transport, Clerical and First Aid divisions, the WVS provided women to do a wide range of essential tasks, such as helping Civil Defence rescue teams, driving ambulances, keeping records of bombed properties and the whereabouts of displaced residents, and supplying the duty watch at ARP posts and fire stations with hot meals. After the war, the WVS took on new tasks, particularly community support for seniors; for example, the organisation invented the Meals On Wheels concept, and continues to offer the service throughout Britain to this day.

Zombie: A conscript who refused to "go active;" i.e., volunteer for service overseas.